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ARIFURETA:
ARIFURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAISAIKYOU
FROM COMMONPLACE
TO WORLD'S STRONGEST

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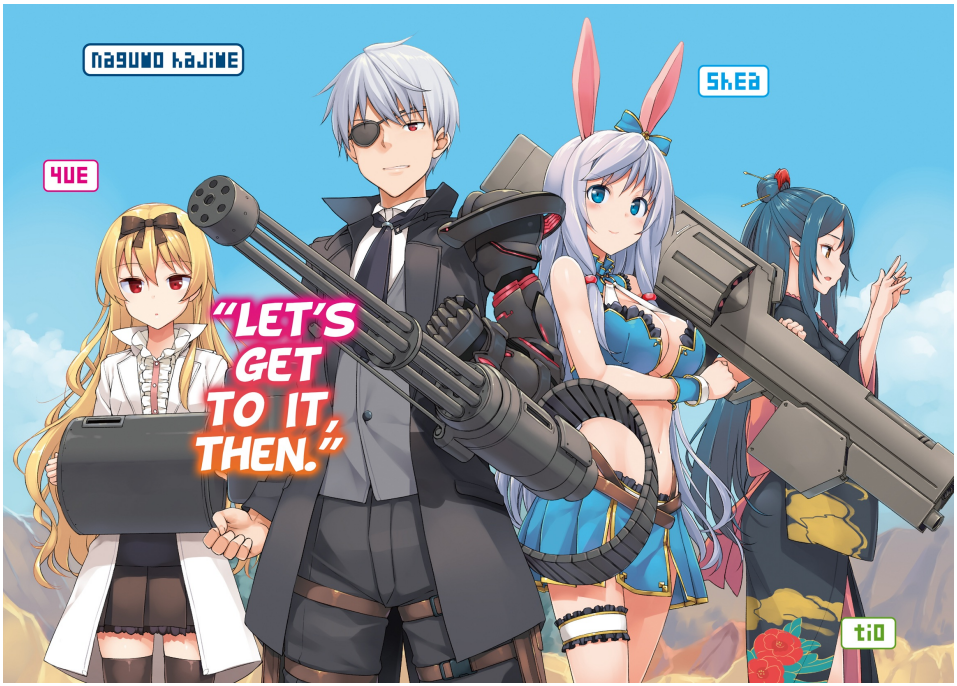
NAGUMO KAJIME
SHEA
YUE
"LET'S GET TO IT, THEN."
TIO

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Prologue

Aiko Hatayama, 25 years old. A high school teacher.

For her, being a teacher wasn't just about teaching a subject to her students and making sure they kept their grades and their appearances up. Of course, those things were important as well, but what Aiko valued more than anything was being there for the students. More concretely, that meant she wanted to be someone outside of their family that her students could rely on whenever they were in trouble.

This resolve had first formed back during a certain incident in her own high school days, but that was a tale for another time. Regardless, it was both her creed and her pride to be someone other than their parents that the students could rely on. If she couldn't uphold that simple principle, then she felt she had no right to call herself a teacher.

Hence why the current situation was one Aiko was extremely displeased with. Not only had they suddenly been thrust into a different world, while she was still reeling from the shock of such an incomprehensible event, it was her student that had calmed everyone down. Then before she knew it, her precious students had begun preparing for a war despite their tender age.

No matter how she tried to persuade them, the students had already been swept up by the current created from their own determination. Her pleas fell on deaf ears, so they marched off to battle despite her protests.

If I can't stop them, then I'll at least be there to fight by their side! But even that hope of hers had been crushed when she discovered her job was useless in combat. Instead, because of how rare and valuable her skills were, she was ordered to go to various towns to improve their farming conditions and create new plots of arable land. She tried to argue back, but both her precious students and this world's priests urged her to go. And because she couldn't deny the fact that she was the only one capable of doing the job, she ended up reluctantly agreeing.

She spent her days fretting over her students, knowing she was powerless to help. Escorted by the church's templar knights and the Heiligh Kingdom's imperial guard, she traveled to various towns and undeveloped areas to improve their soil or create new tracts of farmland. Then, when she was finally able to return, she learned that one of her students had died in battle.

Aiko blamed herself for not insisting that she tag along. She had gone on about her lofty ideals for what a teacher should aspire to, but in the end hadn't she just let herself get swept up by the flow?

Though, even if Aiko had been there, it was doubtful the end result would have changed. However, whether she could have helped or not, the incident served to open her eyes to reality.

She saw how some of the students had become too traumatized to continue fighting, and that many of the nobles and priests were trying to cajole them back onto the battlefield anyway. She swore to herself that she wouldn't ever let herself get swept up by the flow again, and stood up to the nobles and priests. She used her unique position as a bargaining chip, which served her well as both a sword and a shield when it came to negotiating, and demanded that the kingdom stop pestering her students to fight.

In the end, she was successful. The priests and nobles stopped pressuring the students to return to battle.

Ironically, however, her desperate struggle for their sake only endeared her to the students even more. And while none of them would ever return to the Great Orcus Labyrinth again, a good deal of them decided to gather their courage once more and at least guard Aiko while she ran around the country fixing its land.

It wasn't just for her sake, though. They also wanted to honor the sacrifice of the classmate who'd died protecting them, and they felt guilty being the only ones to remain safe in the castle while their classmates fought on in the labyrinth. More than anything, though, they wanted to shake off the shackles of fear that had chained them down for so long, so it wasn't solely because Aiko had fought on their behalf.

Aiko understood this as well, and she was at least glad that some of the students were beginning to overcome their fear and step out of the palace once more.

But at the same time, she didn't want to let them put themselves in danger, which was why she tried to stop them from coming along with arguments like "You shouldn't have to fight,"

and “It’s okay, the knights will protect me,” among others. However, her protests only served to fire up the students even more, and they all exclaimed “We’ll be the ones to protect you, Ai-chan,” in unison.

In the end, she was overwhelmed by their enthusiasm, so she ended up getting dragged into their pace once more.

Incidentally, the knights assigned to guard Aiko had also tried to convince the students to remain at the castle, but the students hadn’t taken kindly to that at all. There was a reason the students mistrusted the knights. And that reason could be summed up in a single sentence.

“Like hell we’re going to let some random nobody take Ai-chan from us!” The students were more worried about the knights assigned to guard Aiko than they were about meeting bandits or monsters on the road. Their fears weren’t entirely baseless. Every knight assigned to Aiko was oddly good-looking. And in truth, the kingdom was hoping to tie Aiko down to their country, so the knights really were a trap. The student that had figured that out had shared the information with everyone else, which was why they’d formed a “Protect Ai-chan from the hot guy troop” defense force.

But the students had made one grave miscalculation. And that was that the hunters had become the hunted. This was what they had told the students when they’d tried to persuade them to stay home:

Templar Knights Commander, David Zahler: “Don’t worry. I’ll protect Aiko. I promise you, I won’t let even a hair on her head be harmed. After all, she’s my ang— Er, my everything.”

Templar Knights Vice Commander, Chase Domino: “I’m prepared to give my all for Aiko-san. Hell, I’d even throw away my faith for her if I had to. So don’t worry, we’ll keep her safe.”

Imperial Guard Joshua Augus: “Meeting Aiko-chan must have been fate. How could I possibly let my fated partner die?”

Imperial Guard Jade Hatto “I swear on my life that I will keep her safe. Not as a member of the Imperial Guard, but as a man.”

At that moment, the students had realized their mistake. *What on earth happened!? Is it just me or are they the ones that fell for her instead!?* They unanimously thought things along those lines.

Originally, they had intended to keep Aiko from falling for one of the knights, but after hearing how they’d all fallen head over

heels for her, their goal had shifted to a protective desire to keep Aiko safe from the knights' advances.

But the students couldn't help but wonder... just what had happened between Aiko and the knights for them to become like this? That was too long a story to mention, but suffice to say Aiko's natural sincerity, cuteness, and tendency to fall flat on her face whenever she tried to do something played a large role in why the knights were now smitten with her. The tales of Aiko's adventures with her merry band of knights were numerous enough to fill a whole book on their own... Quite a bit happened. Quite a bit.

Thus, the students had now been separated into three groups. The hero's group that continued fighting through the labyrinth in order to gain experience for the war to come, the group that chose to remain in the castle, and now the group that would serve as Aiko's bodyguards.

The de facto leader of "Protect Ai-chan from the hot guy troop," henceforth called "Ai-chan's bodyguards," was Yuka Sonobe. Her friends, Miyazaki Nana and Taeko Sugawara, along with Atsushi Tamai and his friends Noboru Aikawa, Akito Nimura, and Yukitoshi Shimizu, made up the entirety of their seven person group. Many of them still hadn't fully recovered from their trauma yet.

It was about two months after the Empire's messenger, the emperor himself, had come to visit Heiligh.

Currently, Aiko's group was en route to the lakeside village of Ur so they could improve the soil in the area. Their carriage rattled noisily as it plodded down the bumpy road, each pebble and pothole adding another bruise to the students' rumps.

"Are you feeling alright, Aiko? If you ever get tired just say so. We can stop for a break anytime."

"I'm fine, David-san. Besides, we just stopped a few minutes ago. I'm not so weak that I'd get tired that quickly."

David was fretting over Aiko, but she seemed to be doing just fine. The inside of the carriage they were in was quite spacious, so it wasn't as rough a ride as it could have been.

"Fufu, the captain's always clucking over you like a mother hen, isn't he, Aiko-san? Though up until recently a single day's travel was enough to leave you completely exhausted, so I suppose his concerns aren't totally unfounded... I'm a little worried about you myself, honestly. Whenever you get tired, just let us know."

"I'm terribly sorry for causing you so much trouble last time.

That was my first trip in a horse-drawn carriage, and... well, I'm used to it now, so it should be fine. Thank you for worrying about me though, Chase-san."

Aiko blushed slightly in embarrassment as she thought back to what had happened the first time she'd ridden in a carriage. Chase fidgeted restlessly for a moment before surreptitiously trying to grab Aiko's hand. However, a cough accompanied by a stern glare from one of the students stopped him short.

More specifically, from Yuka Sonobe, who was sitting diagonally across from Aiko.

Since Yuka and the others were still technically "Ehit's messengers," the knights had prepared a separate carriage for all of them, but they'd insisted on riding with Aiko. They could hardly leave her alone in a carriage full of handsome men after all.

Yuka's no-nonsense haircut and sharp features made the glare all the more intimidating. She hadn't been a delinquent or anything like that back in japan. In fact, she had been a rather diligent student with an unexpected interest in fashion, but her blunt personality had often led her to be misunderstood by others. And she still cut quite the imposing figure with her arms and legs crossed and her eyebrows furrowed. Enough of one that Atsushi averted his gaze, despite the fact that her glare wasn't directed at him.

There were eight people in total inside the carriage. Most of the platoon of knights was riding outside, but the commander and vice commander had argued earlier that they should be riding in the carriage with Aiko. A few of the other knights made up pretexts to sit with Aiko as well. It seemed none of them wanted to be away from her for even a second.

"Oh my, what an angry glare. A beautiful face like yours shouldn't be marred by such a grim countenance." Chase smiled handsomely at Yuka, his teeth dazzling a brilliant white. It was a smile radiant enough to make any normal maiden blush, but Yuka only looked at him like he were a particularly putrid pile of trash.

"Ai-chan-sensei's right here and you have the nerve to call another girl cute? Ai-chan-sensei, this guy's obviously a womanizer. Make sure you're careful around him, okay?"

Yuka turned the conversation into an opportunity to drive her point home. As far as Yuka was concerned, someone who'd call another girl cute when he was in the presence of the woman he'd

fallen for couldn't be any good. Worse, even though they knew it was their duty to seduce Aiko, they still used their good looks to flirt around with other girls. In Yuka's eyes, they were just a bunch of playboys.

"S-Sonobe-san, there's no need to be so antagonistic. And I'm happy that you're finally calling me Sensei, but could you please drop the chan part? Isn't Aiko-sensei good enough?"

"No. The Ai-chan part is important, Ai-chan-sensei. The students are all in agreement on this."

"I-I don't understand, why? And all of the students agreed to this? Is this what the current generation of students really think? I need to try harder to understand you guys... I must become a teacher who's respected and relied on by the students!"

Aiko's self-directed pep talk was so adorable that Yuka and Chase momentarily forgot their quarrel. Aiko herself didn't seem to realize it was because of moments like these that her students all called her "Ai-chan." The road to becoming a respected teacher looked to be a long one.

Four days after that particular incident...

Even Aiko had realized that the knights' aggressive advances must have had something to do with the church or the king's schemes, so she ignored them more often than not. Unfortunately, because of this she failed to realize that a portion of them had actually fallen in love with her for real. In the scant four days it had taken for them to reach Ur, there had been an untold number of cycles where one of the knights would try and profess their love, find themselves being glared at by Yuka and the others, and then the whole situation diffusing because of something Aiko said.

The party began hammering out a plan for fixing Ur's soil situation while they rested in the town's inn. Needless to say, even the simple act of formulating a plan gave rise to multiple situations that would have been perfectly at home in a romantic comedy.

Then, when Aiko finally got started, rumors of the "Aiko the Fertility Goddess" began to spread in the city of Ur as well, causing Aiko no end of embarrassment. But there was a certain incident that put all of those things in the back of her mind. One of her students disappeared.

Aiko began searching frantically for her precious student. Not knowing that a shocking reunion awaited her. A reunion that would end in a conclusion no one wished for.

Chapter I: An Adventurer's Job

"Fufu, today is the day I finally uncover what secrets you're hiding!" The waxing moon's light pierced through the patchwork veil of clouds that partially obscured it and illuminated the ground below. Pale beams of light danced back and forth as clouds blew past the moon. One of the rays fell upon a certain building. Or more precisely, it fell upon a certain girl that was currently rappelling down a rope attached to one side of the building. She looked like a special forces operative, with the apparent ease and skill she slid down the bricks.

After she made it down to the third floor window she flipped herself upside-down, then peered over the upper sill into the room inside.

"Asking Crystabel-san to teach me how to climb has finally paid off. I bet you'd never expect me to be up here, kukuku. Now, show me just what kind of crazy erotic roleplaying you two do in bed!" Hanging from the roof of the Masaka Inn and panting excitedly was none other than Sona, the daughter of the innkeeper. The bright, cheerful, straightforward, hardworking girl loved by most of the town. True, she was by no means a stunning beauty, but there was a simple rustic charm to her looks. More than one guy had their sights set on her.

Right now, that same girl was using the skills she'd acquired to spy on a certain room. If the men smitten with her saw her now they'd be completely disillusioned... Sona looked more like a perverted old man than a charming young girl right now.

"Gah, why is it so dark? I can't see properly. Maybe if I adjust the angle a little..."

"Like this?"

"Yes, that's perfect... Still, why is it so quiet? I was certain I'd hear someone moaning at the very least..."

"Well, it's not hard to dampen sound with magic."

"Hah!? I see! Kuh, how crafty! But I won't give up! I'll unearth their steamy secrets if it's the last thing I do..."

Just as a refresher, this was third floor. Unless someone was doing something as ridiculous as Sona, it didn't make sense for her to be able to hear anyone's voice. A waterfall of sweat cascaded down her brow as she creakily turned around. Behind her, floating in the air, stood Hajime, a cold smile on his face.

"I-Ish's not what you shink, dear guest. I, uhh, well, oh! I'm inspecting the walls!"

"Oh really? This late at night?"

"Y-Yes. See, if I do it at night, no one will notice. If people saw us doing repairs in the middle of the day they'd think we're a run-down establishment."

"I see. I suppose an inn's reputation *is* important after all."

"E-Exactly! We have to keep up appearances!"

"By the way, I've been hearing disturbing rumors lately about a peeping tom in the inn. What do you think about that?"

"Th-That sounds like a serious problem! O-Our inn d-doesn't tolerate such indecency."

"Yeah, that's what I thought. Peeping is intolerable, right?"

"Y-Yes, completely intolerable..."

Hajime and Sona both started laughing. Though neither of them actually looked happy. There was a cold gleam in Hajime's eyes, while on the other hand there was a trickle of sweat dripping from Sona's forehead as she trembled nervously.

"Die."

"Hiiii! I'm sorry!"

Hajime stopped laughing as suddenly as he'd started and grabbed Sona by the face. His metallic fingers creaked as he dug into her skin. Sona screamed, begging for forgiveness as she struggled inside his grip.

Sona was just an average girl, so the amount of force Hajime was putting into his grip was a bit overkill. Had this been her first offense, Hajime wouldn't have been so harsh. But ever since they'd returned from the Reisen Labyrinth and booked a room at the inn, she'd been using every means at her disposal to try and peep on them, so Hajime was starting to get sick of it. The reason they'd still come back to the inn despite knowing this might happen was because of how good the food was.

Around the time Sona started twitching a little, Hajime sighed and finally adjusted his hold on her so he was carrying her under his arm. Sona let out a sigh of relief, but then when she looked

down... she saw a demon waiting for her. Her mother, the demon, was smiling, but just like Hajime's smile it didn't reach her eyes.

"Hiii!"

She noticed Sona had spotted her, so she beckoned gently, a mother calling to her child, like a devil beckoning her down into hell.

"It looks like a hundred spanks wasn't enough. Perhaps more will work."

"Noooooooooo!" Sona let out a terrified shriek as she thought back to other spankings she'd received when she had been caught. Her buttcheeks were going to be swollen come breakfast time. Hajime sighed again. He was getting tired of repeating this farce every night.

After handing Sona over to her mother, Hajime went back up to his room and flopped down into bed.

"...Well done."

"Welcome back."

Yue and Shea greeted him as he returned. The faint moonlight pouring through the window, the only lighting inside the room, dimly outlined the two girls.

Both of them were sitting on the bed across from his. And both of them were wearing nothing but their negligees. Their beauty was such that even a second-rate painter would be able to create a masterpiece simply by using them as models.

"Yo. I don't get it, why's that girl so hell-bent on peeping on us... Normally, you wouldn't rappel down the roof just to catch someone having sex, would you? I'm starting to think we should pick a different inn, even if the food isn't as good." Shea let out a small chuckle, walked over to Hajime's bed, and sat down next to him. Yue too, headed over to Hajime's bed and lifted his head onto her lap. Hajime let himself momentarily enjoy the sensation of being given a lap pillow. It really was quite wonderful.

"Our relationship must have sparked Sona-chan's teenage curiosity, is all. You can't really blame her, can you? Besides, I think it's kind of cute."

"Though, I am a little... worried about how elaborate her schemes are becoming."

"Yeah, yesterday she made a snorkel and tried to hide in the bath... Finding a pair of eyes staring at me from the bottom of the tub was quite a shock."

“Yeah, having the innkeeper’s daughter basically stalk us is kind of... Especially since it seems like she’s only after us...”

Shea snuggled closer to Hajime while they talked. She inconspicuously put her hand over his and tried to guide it to her breasts. A faint blush spread across her cheeks as she nervously thought about what would come next.

Hajime gave Shea’s hand a little squeeze. Shea jumped in surprise. She happily increased the strength of her own grip. In return, Hajime squeezed back even harder.

This cycle repeated itself a few times until Shea finally noticed what was happening.

“Hey, Hajime-san! You’re crushing it! You’re crushing my hand!” *Creak!*

“Hiiii! I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I got too full of myself, okay!? It won’t happen again! Please let me go! You’re breaking my hand! I can feel it cracking!”

“I saw you casually trying to set up a good mood, you know? Why are you even here, anyway? Your room’s over there.” Shea struggled to free her hand, but Hajime’s grip was as tight as a vice.

“I-I was hoping to slowly sneak my way into bed with you. Come on, we’ve already kissed. Can’t we just have a little alone time?”

“Hell no. I only did that to save your life.”

She was, of course, referring to the time Miledi Reisen had flushed them out of her labyrinth like they were unwanted pieces of offal. Because of the strange fish creature Shea had seen, she’d nearly drowned and had to be saved via CPR by Hajime. She had somehow had enough of her consciousness left to know she was being kissed, and upon waking had assaulted Hajime with all her inhuman might, which had resulted in Hajime being kissed over and over.

He’d pulled her off and thrown her into the fountain quickly enough, but for Shea that was still the precious memory of her first kiss.

No matter how coldly Hajime brushed her off, this worthless rabbit just didn’t know when to give up. Shea smiled smugly, like a famous detective that had finally deduced who the criminal was.

“No, I can tell. You’ve already started to fall for me, Hajime-san! You’re way nicer to me than you used to be! If we think about all the evidence piled up it’s clear that... Guhehe.” *Creaaaaak!*

“Owww! You’re bweaking me!” Unwilling to hear any more of Shea’s blabbering, Hajime squeezed harder.

Shea let out a garbled shriek and finally managed to pull her hand away. She nursed her throbbing fingers as she sulked over in one corner of the bed. Her rabbit ears flopped about dejectedly.

Hajime ignored her and turned toward Yue. Since he was still resting in her lap that basically meant looking straight up. Yue, too, looked down at Hajime.

“By the way, Yue. You haven’t been stopping Shea as much. Did you have a change of heart or something?” Yue tilted her head to the side, thinking. As Hajime had said, her attitude toward Shea had grown far more tolerant since they’d cleared Reisen’s Labyrinth.

In the beginning, Yue had mercilessly stopped Shea anytime she’d attempted to get close to Hajime, but lately Yue had become a lot more lax about Shea’s overtures. Even when Shea went for something big, like a kiss, Yue just pouted unhappily.

“Shea worked hard. And she’s going to keep working hard to stay with us. Plus, she likes both you and me.”

“Well, I guess, but…”

“…And I… kind of like her.”

“Figured as much. It’s obvious just by looking that you get along pretty well.”

From what little Yue had said, Hajime could tell that she treasured Shea a great deal.

It made sense, honestly. Since mana was dispersed with far more intensity within the labyrinth than even in the gorge, Yue hadn’t been able to exhibit her full strength. The same had gone for Hajime. With just the two of them, conquering the labyrinth would have been quite a hassle. Sure, Hajime might have been able to tackle the labyrinth on his own, but he’d probably have had to burn through a few of his Ambrosia vials in order to do so. It was only thanks to Shea that they’d been able to clear it without wasting any resources.

What was truly amazing was that Shea had never held a weapon in her life until just a few weeks ago. In fact, she’d actively avoided conflict as much as possible. She was one of the rabbitmen, the race known as the weakest of the beastmen species, that hated fighting above all else.

She must have been scared that entire time in the labyrinth,

and yet she'd never once said that she wanted to go back. In order to stay with Hajime and Yue, she'd braved the hell known as a labyrinth. She'd grit her teeth and pushed valiantly onward, crying all the while.

Because she cared that much about Yue and Hajime, her devotion had let her overcome her fear.

It wasn't that Yue hadn't been jealous. In fact, that was precisely why it had been so hard for her to accept Shea's feelings for Hajime. After all, she'd been pretty harsh on Shea too. But no matter how many times she was rebuffed, Shea kept on trying to befriend Yue. On top of that, she'd shown her determination when she'd stuck with them through the entire labyrinth. Her constant efforts had moved Yue.

Come to think of it, Yue didn't have any friends, did she? Even before she had been sealed, she'd been busy leading her country. Her position hadn't allowed her to make any friends. She'd been a loner the whole time.

And so, the appearance of Shea, who had no ulterior motives in wanting to become Yue's friend, was a true blessing. That was why Yue had justified it to herself with "Well, if it's Shea, it's okay..." and let her get away with more and more.

"...Besides."

"Hm?" Hajime looked back up at Yue. Her eyes were a whirl of emotion. Confidence, charm, resolution, sincerity, all mingled together as she smiled down at him. She looked so majestic that Hajime involuntarily held his breath. He found himself lost in her gaze, her eyes deep pools that sucked him in. They stared unblinkingly at each other for a long time.

"...Your heart already belongs to me."

"....."

No matter who falls in love with him, no matter who else he decides to let into his bed, the one most important to him will always be me.

Of that, Yue was sure. And so, this was her declaration of war. Her declaration of war against all those Hajime had already met, and all those he might come to meet.

Hajime was speechless. Bewitched, he gazed intently into Yue's sparkling eyes. Gently, ever so gently, he placed a hand on her cheek. She covered his hand with her own. Dim moonlight framed the two figures as they drew close together, their shadows merging on the wall behind them.

Just before they completely overlapped—

“Ugh... You could at least pretend to remember I’m still here. I feel so lonely... Hic...”

Shea was hugging her knees on the other corner of the bed, tears streaming from her eyes, bunny ears drooping sadly. Even Hajime felt a little uncomfortable seeing her so depressed. Yue awkwardly beckoned her over.

"Yue-saaaaan!" Shea cried out as she leaped into Yue's bosom, sniffling. Yue patted her head gently, and soon enough the steady breathing of a sleeping bunny girl could be heard. Hajime smiled wryly as he looked down at Shea.

"You're more like her mom than her friend."

"If I'm going to have kids, I want them to be yours."

"....."

"Don't be too hard on Shea, okay?"

"Alright, I'll try."

"Mmm... I love you."

"Me too."

In the end, Hajime ended up sleeping sandwiched between the both of them.

From that day onward, Yue gave Shea permission to sleep in the same room as them. Naturally, Shea let this get to her head and tried to assault Hajime every night, to no avail.

Shea's screams of pain served to stimulate Sona's imagination even further, and she went to even greater lengths to spy on the trio's nightly activities.

The Brooke adventurer's guild's door opened with a cheerful clang. Three people walked inside. Hajime, Yue, and Shea, who had grown famous around the town.

As always, there were a few people sitting around inside the guild. A few of them raised a hand in greeting as Hajime and the others walked by. Many of the guys still gazed at Yue and Shea with longing, and glared at Hajime with burning envy, but there was a distinct lack of malice in their stares.

In the week they'd spent back in Brooke, countless scores of men had tried to profess their love to Yue and Shea, but they'd all been shot down. Some of them still remembered Yue's ball crushing incident, so instead of going to her directly, they had tried to get on Hajime's good side first.

Hajime had, of course, ignored them entirely. The truly

desperate ones had tried to challenge Hajime to a duel, only to find themselves on the receiving end of his rubber bullets. Many an unfortunate soul had found themselves spinning through the air and kissing the dirt before they'd even drawn their weapon.

Rumors had begun to spread about Yue the ball crusher and her partner, Hajime the duelist crusher. Their fame had steadily been on the rise.

Though they hadn't registered a party name with the guild, people had taken to calling them the "smashers," much to Hajime's chagrin.

Meanwhile, Shea was lamenting the fact that no one seemed to remember she was part of their group too.

"Oh, all three of you are together today?" Old lady Catherine was manning the reception desk. The reason for Catherine's surprise was that this past week, Hajime had either come alone, or Yue and Shea had visited as a pair.

"Yeah. We're heading out tomorrow, but we wanted to come thank you for everything you've done for us first. Oh, and to see if there's any requests related to our destination." That "everything" had included lending Hajime one of the guild's rooms for free. He had wanted to see what kind of stuff he could do by combining his newfound gravity magic with his creation magic, but he'd needed a wide open space for that. When he'd come to Catherine to ask where he could find one of those, she'd offered to let him use one of the guild's rooms for free.

In the meantime, Yue and Shea had been spending time outside the town training their gravity manipulation abilities.

"I see. Leaving already? Guess it'll get lonely here again. The town's been a lot livelier since you three returned."

"Give me a break. I've had enough of peeping perverts, clothing store perverts, perverts begging Yue and Shea to step on them, perverts stalking them and calling them 'onee-sama,' and idiots challenging me to duels... This town's full of nothing but them. Seventy percent of the people I've met are perverts, and the other thirty are idiots... There's something seriously wrong with this place." Hajime's complaints were more or less on the mark. Sona was one thing, but every time he'd gone to Crystabel's shop, he could feel a hungry gaze devouring him.

There were also three factions in Brooke that were constantly feuding with each other. The first was the "I want to be stepped on

by Yue-chan" faction, the second was the "I want to be Shea-chan's slave" faction, and the last was the "I want to become Onee-sama's apprentice" faction. Their names were rather self-explanatory, and the three factions were constantly competing for members.

Hajime and the others did their best to steer clear of all of them, though.

Yue was already having nightmares about all the guys that prostrated herself before her, begging her to step on them. And Hajime had no idea just how some of the other guys had come to the conclusion that they wanted to be Shea's slave. Beastmen were supposed to be discriminated against, and it wasn't clear how becoming her slave would help their chances with her, but trying to understand their motives was more effort than it was worth, so Shea just eliminated them.

Meanwhile, the female group's primary objective was trying to remove Hajime. One of them had even tried to stab him with a knife, going "How dare you leech off of Onee-sama, you parasite! I'm gonna cut your balls offfff!"

Obviously killing a young girl in the middle of the street would've led to some complications, so Hajime had just stripped her naked, tied her up bondage style, and dangled her from the roof of the tallest building in town. To top it off, he'd stuck a sign to her that read "I'll kill the next person that tries that." That managed to scare the girls into submission.

Hajime grimaced as he thought back to his time in this town, while Catherine smiled sympathetically.

"Now now, you can't deny things were interesting at least."

"Interesting in a bad way, maybe."

"So, where are you headed next?"

"Fuhren." They continued chatting idly while Catherine rifled through the requests, looking to see if any involved Fuhren.

Fuhren was the independent merchant state Hajime had read about when he'd first arrived. Hajime's next destination was the Grand Gruen Volcano, which was located within the Gruen Desert. As the desert lay on the western edge of the continent, the trio had decided to make a quick stop in Fuhren, as it was on the way. Once they cleared the volcano, their next destination was the labyrinth located at the bottom of the sea, the Sunken Ruins of Melusine. Those were even further to the west, past the desert.

"Hmmm, oh, here we are. Found something. There's a merchant

convoy looking for guards. They've got room for one more person... What do you think? Want to accept it?" Hajime scanned the document Catherine handed to him. Like she'd said, it seemed to be an escort mission. His job would be to escort a medium-sized caravan, and it looked like they wanted around 15 guards. As Yue and Shea still weren't registered adventurers, having one slot open was just perfect.

"It's fine if I bring these two with me still, right?"

"It should be alright. Bringing a large crowd with you would be a different story, but most adventurers bring along a porter or slave to carry their luggage anyway. Besides, Yue-chan and Shea-chan are quite strong. They're getting a steal, hiring all of you for the price of one. I'm sure they'd happily let them tag along."

"I see. Hmmm, what do you guys think?"

Hajime turned around, seeking input from the two girls behind him. He'd personally been hoping for a delivery request. That way he'd be able to use his magic motorcycle to get them to Fuhren way faster than any caravan could. Purposely slowing down his pace just for a quest didn't really sound all that appealing.

"We're not in any hurry."

"Yeah. Besides, it might be fun to travel with other adventurers for once. Who knows, some of the veterans might be able to teach us a few things."

"I suppose it's true we're not in any real hurry, and it might not be so bad traveling with others..." Hajime nodded pensively and accepted the request. Like Yue had said, they were in no rush to conquer the labyrinths. Hurrying too much could lead to a fatal mistake, and Shea was right that some of the adventurers might be able to teach them useful tricks for the road ahead.

"Very well. I'll let them know, so make sure you're at the main gate first thing tomorrow morning."

"You got it."

While Hajime was filling out the paperwork, Catherine shifted her gaze to Yue and Shea.

"Make sure you take care of yourselves, alright? If this brat ever makes you cry, then make sure you drag him back here. I'll wallop him good for you."

"Okay, we will. Thanks."

"Bye, Catherine-san. Thanks for everything!"

Yue and Shea smiled at Catherine. Shea's smile especially was

dazzling.

The way Catherine and the people of this town had treated her had almost made her forget how beastmen were usually treated in human settlements. Naturally, not everyone had been so accepting, but Catherine, Sona, Crystabel, and even her fans had treated her like a normal girl. She wasn't sure whether more tolerant people just gravitated toward this town in particular, but to her this place had felt like a second home.

"You better not do anything that'd make these girls cry, you hear? Even if you manage to escape my wrath, God will surely punish you if you do."

"You sure like lecturing people. Don't worry, I know." Hajime smiled wryly. Catherine handed him a piece of paper. Puzzled, Hajime took it.

"What's this?"

"It look like you three have got a huge burden to bear. Think of this as my apology for all the trouble the townspeople caused you. If you ever get into any trouble with the guild branches in the other towns, just show that letter to them. It'll help you out." Catherine winked conspiratorially at Hajime. *Just who is this lady? One letter from her and even the adventurer's guild's upper management will fold?*

"Oh, and don't ask me why. Every girl's entitled to a few secrets, don't you think?"

"Haah, alright. Thanks for the help."

"Girls like an obedient man. I don't know what your future's got in store for you, but you better not die on me." For an old guild receptionist working in a small town in the middle of nowhere, Catherine sure had a lot of mystery surrounding her. A contented smile split her lips as she watched Hajime and the others leave.

Next, they went to visit Crystabel. Hajime had been staunchly against the idea, but Yue and Shea had insisted, so he found himself tagging along as they went to say their goodbyes. But when Crystabel learned it was their last day in town, he turned into a monstrous bundle of sadness that tried to attack Hajime, which resulted in an odd situation of Hajime trying to destroy Crystabel with his wave motion cannon while Yue and Shea desperately tried to hold him back. Needless to say, the goodbyes were completely forgotten.

Lastly, when Sona had heard it was their last night there, she had pulled out all the stops in her attempt to peek on Hajime in the

bath and in his room. When she'd eventually been turned over to her mom, instead of a spanking she was strung up in front of the inn all night, tied up in grand bondage fashion. Why Sona's mom knew how to make those knots, no one could say.

The next morning. Reminiscing about the "pleasant" memories they'd had in this town, Hajime and the others made their way to the main gate. They found the caravan manager waiting for them, along with the other adventurers who'd accepted the request. It appeared they were the last to arrive, so when they got there the other adventurers all broke into a clamor.

"H-Hey, don't tell me the smashers are coming with us!?"

"No way! Man, I don't know whether to be happy or terrified."

"God, my hand won't stop trembling."

"That's just your withdrawal symptoms, man."

Some people were happy to see Yue and Shea, others reflexively covered their balls, and yet others tried to blame their alcohol addiction on Hajime. Hajime frowned as he approached. Once he was closer, the caravan manager called out to him.

"You're the last guard, right?"

"Yep, here's the request paper." Hajime pulled out the form he'd filled out. The caravan manager glanced at it, nodded, and introduced himself.

"My name is More Nos. I'm the leader of this expedition. I've heard from Catherine that you're a very accomplished adventurer even though your rank is still blue. I'm expecting good things from you."

"More Nos? Must be exhausting work, managing a caravan..."

The caravan manager's name reminded Hajime of a certain energy drink. More tilted his head in confusion, but then replied with a smile.

"I suppose, but I'm used to it now."

"Well, I'll try to live up to your expectations at least. The name's Hajime. The two behind me are Yue and Shea."

"Glad to hear it... By the way, that rabbit girl of yours... you wouldn't happen to be interested in selling her, would you? I'd be willing to pay more than a fair price for her." More looked over Shea appraisingly. Not only did she have pale hair, a rarity for the rabbitmen, she was quite the beauty. As a merchant, it was in his nature to try and obtain rare goods whenever possible. And he was quite the excellent businessman, discerning instantly that Shea must

have been Hajime's slave and moving right into negotiations.

Shea scowled unhappily and hid behind Hajime. Yue glared daggers at More. But from an objective viewpoint, More was simply doing what was natural for a businessman. Normally, one would assume any beastmen living outside the sea of trees had to be someone's slave. More wasn't to blame for his misconception.

"Oh, she seems quite attached to you... I see that you must treat her well. I promise to treat her just as nicely, so what do you say?"

"You look like a shrewd businessman... I'm sure you already know what my answer is."

More tried to press onward, his hungry gaze fixated on Shea, but Hajime curtly turned him down. A good judge of people, More could already tell Hajime wouldn't part with her, but the thought of the profits he could reap made him unwilling to give up so easily. He thought frantically for anything he could use as a bargaining chip.

Hajime could see where he was going with this, and repeated himself more firmly.

"Even if the gods themselves asked, I wouldn't part with her... Understand?"

"...Alright, I get it. I give up. Still, if you ever change your mind, please come to Nos' trading company first. Anyway, it's about time we set off. Ask the adventurer over there to fill you in on the details on the way."

Hajime's words had been quite dangerous. Had the Holy Church heard his declaration, they would have branded him a heretic. Technically, even the Holy Church admitted there were gods other than the supreme ruler, Ehit, and that the demons worshiped a different one, so simply mentioning that there were other gods wasn't a heretical statement.

But the way Hajime had phrased it, that all the gods were somehow equal, was borderline at best. That was why More had realized Hajime was serious about never letting Shea go. But his enterprising spirit led him to still try one last futile attempt, and he urged Hajime to come to his business first if he ever changed his mind.

Hajime trudged over to the wagon where all the other adventurers were gathered. They were all watching him in awe as he approached.

"Amazing... to go so far for one girl... That sent shivers down

my spine, man!"

"I see now why everyone respects you as the duelist smasher. You won't forgive anyone who lays a finger on your girls... Heh, what a man."

"I hope someone says something like that to me one day."

"Come on, you're a dude. No way anyone's gonnaaaaaa! I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

Hajime could feel a headache coming on and he tiredly rubbed his temples. *Everyone living in Brooke is a moron.*

Suddenly, he felt something squishy press up against his back, and found himself being hugged from behind. When he looked behind him, he saw Shea resting her chin on his shoulder. She was blushing bright red and smiling triumphantly.

"Look, there's no special meaning behind that, okay? Don't misunderstand."

"Ufufufufu... I know. Ufufufu~"

Hajime had just meant that he would never abandon anyone important to him, but even when he said as much to Shea she didn't look convinced. After all, the man she loved had just said he'd fight the gods to keep her. Regardless of his intentions, that would still make any girl happy.

Too late, Hajime realized he might have gone a bit overboard in his desire to cut negotiations short as quickly as possible. Yue tottered over to him and tugged at his sleeve.

"Hm? What is it, Yue?"

"Mmm... You looked cool, so it's okay."

"Thanks for trying to cheer me up." Hajime gratefully stroked her cheek, and Yue contentedly closed her eyes.

Hajime stood in the early morning light, staring out at the road with two beautiful girls hanging off his arms.

All of the women watched the spectacle warmly, while all the guys looked on with dead eyes. In a way, one could say Hajime was reaping what he'd sown.

It took roughly six days by carriage to go from Brooke to Fuhren.

They struck out from the road just before sunrise, and usually stopped to camp right before sunset. The first three days passed uneventfully. They were already halfway to Fuhren. Only three days left. Their progress had been smooth. Hajime had been entrusted with the rearguard, but he'd had no reason to draw his weapons the

entire trip.

The fourth day passed peacefully as well, and they were stopping to make camp. Everyone was responsible for their own meals. The adventurers all ate while they stayed on watch for any incoming threats. None of them seemed comfortable taking their meals with the traders. It had pretty much become an unspoken rule that they ate separately.

Besides, since they were out on a request, the adventurers had all made sure to bring portable rations. The more extravagant food one brought, the more luggage they'd have to bring to prepare it. And in the case of a fight, that would just get in the way. In return, they usually gorged themselves on a feast once they completed their request and obtained their reward.

Or at least, that was what Hajime had heard from the adventurers he'd talked to on their second day out. While he'd been eating a scrumptious stew complete with a loaf of freshly baked bread on the side.

"Soooo good! Man, this is delicious. I don't care if you're a beastman or what, Shea, please just marry me!"

"Mmmph... Mmmgh... Gulp... Hey, get your hands off her! Shea-chan's *my* wife!"

"Pah, who'd marry a dirty little urchin like you? Learn your place, you commoner! By the way, Shea-chan, would you be willing to accompany me to dinner once we arrive in the city? My treat, of course."

"Th-Then I'll take Yue-chan! Yue-chan, please have dinner with me!"

"Yue-chan's spoon... Haah... Haah..."

The adventurers all heartily tucked into Shea's stew.

On the first day, while the other adventurers had all taken out hardtack and dried jerky, the trio had pulled out pots and pans from Hajime's Treasure Trove and set about to cooking. The adventurers had all been drawn in by the pleasant smell, and they drooled with envy as they watched Hajime, Yue, and Shea chow down on a delicious meal. Finding it hard to keep eating, Shea had offered to share, and now this was what mealtime had become every day.

Of course, Hajime had had no issue eating his food while the adventurers looked on like starving dogs. He had had no intention of sharing, either.

But as Shea had become the de facto cook of their party, she

had the final say in all food-related matters. It wasn't like Hajime or Yue couldn't cook, but most of their food ended up relatively bland. Hajime was a guy, and Yue formal royalty, so neither of them were very well versed in cooking. And so, if Shea offered to share, Hajime couldn't exactly say no.

At first the adventurers had just been grateful, flocking like starving hyenas at mealtime to be delivered from their hell of hardtack and dried meat. But as time went on, they grew bolder and bolder, and now they were making passes at Shea and Yue every chance they got.

When the noise became too much, Hajime silently activated Intimidation. The adventurers, who'd been warmed by Shea's stew, suddenly felt chilled to the bone. Hajime gulped down a piece of meat and slowly looked up at the gathered adventurers. His voice was barely a whisper, but everyone heard him clearly.

"So, who wants to volunteer to be my punching bag first?"

"We're sorry for getting ahead of ourselves!" They all apologized in unison. Almost all of them were seasoned veterans far older than Hajime, but they still prostrated themselves before him. His Intimidation skill was part of it, but part of it also stemmed from the reputation he'd earned himself within Brooke. None who knew the tales dared oppose him.

"Oh, lay off, Hajime-san. It's dinnertime, what's wrong with a little talking? B-Besides, no matter what anyone else says, you're the only one for me."

"Like I care."

"Hwau!?" Shea tried to sneak in a cute comment there, but Hajime shot her down instantly.

"Hajime."

"Hm? What is it, Yue?" Hajime faltered slightly when he saw Yue's sharp glare.

"Hmph!" Yue flicked Hajime's forehead with her finger. She was reminding Hajime of the promise he'd made to be a little nicer to Shea. Since Hajime wasn't exactly in love with Shea, he figured treating her like he would a member of his family was good enough... but apparently it wasn't for Yue.

"Hajime-san! You better be nicer or I won't give you any of the meat skewers I made!" Yue's lack of interference had made Shea bolder too. She was no longer deterred by Hajime's barbed dismissals. True to her optimistic nature, she bounced back from

any setback quickly.

"Seriously, where does all that... Never mind. Fine, I'll be nicer, so give me a skewer."

"Fufu, you want it that badly? Then say aaah."

"....."

Blushing slightly, Shea brought the skewer closer to Hajime's mouth. *She really wants to feed me?* Hajime glanced back at Yue. She happily picked up a skewer of her own, then waited patiently. She probably wanted to feed him after Shea was done.

Feeling the gazes of all the other adventurers directed at him as well, Hajime sighed and reluctantly opened his mouth. Shea beamed with joy.

"Say aaaah."

"....." Hajime silently bit off a piece of meat and chewed slowly. Shea was beet red now. A second later, another skewer was offered to Hajime.

"Say aaaaah."

"....." Hajime bit down silently once more. Once he was done chewing, Shea offered him another. When he finished that, Yue had another at the ready.

Leaving aside whether or not Hajime was actually enjoying the situation, the onlookers were all seething with jealousy. *Go die, you fucker!* They all screamed angrily, but only internally. The reason the please was added in there was because they still feared Hajime's might.

Two days later. A mere day before they reached the safety of the city, some brigands interrupted their travels. Shea was the first to spot them. Or hear them, rather. Her rabbit ears picked up the sounds of movement coming from the forest that bordered the path, and she quickly called out a warning.

"Enemy attack! They're coming from the forest! There's more than a hundred of them!" The adventurers all stiffened up. It was true that their path took them right next to the forest, but it shouldn't have been that dangerous a place. Especially considering that it led to the most renowned trading city on the continent. They would have taken pains to make sure the highways heading to it remained safe. True, people still encountered monsters on the path, but they usually didn't run into hordes of more than twenty, maybe forty at worst.

"Shit, more than a hundred? I'd heard there hadn't been any

monster attacks the past few weeks on the road... Could they just have been gathering their strength? Sheesh, you'd think the patrols would at least check the forest!" The captain of the guards, Gartima, grimaced and spat out a curse. They only had fifteen guards. Even if he counted Yue and Shea, that only brought the numbers up to seventeen. It didn't seem likely that they'd get out of the fight unscathed. They'd just get overwhelmed by sheer numbers.

Also, the reason the adventurers included Shea as part of their combat strength, despite the fact that rabbitmen were known to be peace-loving creatures, was because of the stories that had been told about her in Brooke. One time her overzealous fan club had annoyed her to the point that she'd blown them all away with a single punch, causing her reputation to spread.

Gartima called for all the guards to halt, hoping that if they tried to hold the horde back here the merchants at least might manage to escape. However, Hajime proposed an alternative solution.

"If you're worried, how about letting us kill them all?"

"Huh?"

Hajime spoke casually, as if he was simply offering to go buy groceries. Stunned by how unbelievable a suggestion it was, Gartima could only manage a foolish questioning sound.

"Like I said, just leave them to us. We'll wipe em all out."

"B-But it'll be difficult just to protect the caravan as is... Umm, are you sure you can do it? The monsters that show up around these parts aren't that strong, but with that many..."

"The numbers are no problem for us. Don't worry, Yue will finish them in an instant." Hajime put a hand on Yue's shoulder. She didn't look very concerned either, choosing to simply affirm Hajime's statement.

Gartima hesitated. He had heard the rumors about Yue's powerful sorcery. He presumed that even if they couldn't annihilate them all, with how confident Hajime looked they'd at least be able to whittle down their numbers a good deal. Perhaps it was worth letting them try instead of risking splitting their forces.

"Alright. We'll do it your way. It's alright if you can't get them all, as long as you lower their numbers enough. We'll get as many as we can with our own magic after that, and hopefully there'll be few enough left that we can take them down. Got that, guys?"

"Yes sir!" The adventurers all shouted in unison. None of them

believed Yue could actually wipe them all out.

There really isn't anything to worry about, though. Well I guess it makes sense from their perspective, since mages like Yue aren't all that common.

The adventurers formed a defensive wall in front of the caravan. A mixture of determination and nervousness settled over their faces. There was no light banter to be had among them right now. Hajime had heard a lot about these veteran adventurers' travels, but it was only now that he fully appreciated how long they must have been doing this. The merchants were all timidly hiding inside their carriages, occasionally peeking out to see what was happening.

Hajime and the others climbed up to one of the carriages roofs.

"Yue, I know you don't need to, but chant the spell. It'll be a pain to explain otherwise."

"Chant... the spell?"

"Uhh, do you not know how to?"

"Don't worry, it'll be fine."

"That's only making me more worried..."

"Ten seconds until they reach us." Hajime had wanted to avoid any unnecessary questions, but as Yue had never needed to chant a spell before, she wasn't even aware of what the words were. It would have been fine if she'd just mumbled something random in a quiet voice, but the problem stemmed even deeper than that. It looked like she didn't even know that spells came with chants.

Shea's warning cut Hajime off before he could explain. Yue raised her right hand and pointed it at the forest.

"Illuminate the darkness with blinding crimson. Shatter the fetters of my eternal prison and break through all in thine path. We who would be the strongest call upon this power, and together we rend the heavens— Draconic Thunder!" The clouds that had gathered split apart as Yue finished chanting. A fearsome dragon forged entirely of lightning descending from opening. It resembled a serpent as it snaked its way down to earth.

"Wh-What the..." Someone whispered in awe.

The adventurers ignored the incoming onslaught of monsters, their attention entirely focused on the lightning dragon. Even the mages in the party had never seen nor heard of a spell like this. Their mouths were hanging open in wonder as they watched.

It wasn't just the adventurers who were looking up in awe,

however. Even the bloodthirsty monsters stopped in their tracks and looked up, frozen in place by the sheer majesty of the dragon bearing down upon them.

At Yue's signal, it opened its jaws wide and hurtled toward the army of monsters.

Roooooooooooooooooar!

"Uwaah!?"

"Dowaaah!?"

"Kyaaaaa!"

The dragon's bore down onto a clump of monsters, swallowing them whole. Without even an opportunity to fight back, they were all incinerated. Then, at Yue's command, the dragon coiled around itself, surrounding all of the monsters.

Any who tried to flee were consumed by the wall of lightning, leaving only ashes behind. The dragon opened its massive jaws once more. The monsters didn't even have time to feel pain before they were obliterated, some of them seemingly jumping into its maw of their own volition when they realized escape was impossible. The last thing they saw was the majestic dragon bearing down on them. Once they were annihilated, the dragon let out a thunderclap of a howl and dispersed into a thousand lightning bolts.

Fearing for their lives, the adventurers and merchants all screamed and dove to the ground. When the danger was finally past, they tentatively opened their eyes and looked around. Nothing remained. Only the charred ground gave any indication of the battle that had taken place here, if it could even be called that.

"...Hm. I overdid it."

"Holy crap, I didn't even know magic like that existed..."

"Isn't this one of Yue-san's originals? She probably took the description of a dragon that you gave her and mixed it with her own spell."

"So this is what you were up to while I was holed up in that guild room... By the way, Yue, that chant..."

"Yeah... I modeled it after our meeting, and our future." Though she spoke in the same deadpan manner as always, Hajime could tell she was rather proud of her achievement.

He smiled wryly and ran his hands through her hair. He'd wanted her to use an actual chant to avoid suspicion, but didn't have the heart to tell her off for it given how proud she looked.

This was Yue's original spell, made by combining gravity magic and lightning magic, Draconic Thunder. Specifically, by combining Reisen's gravity magic with the advanced level Thunder Hammer spell.

By giving the lightning proper weight, Yue could control its direction instead of just letting it strike straight and true. The reason she's molded it after the mythical dragons Hajime had described to her was simply because she thought they sounded cool.

The area near its jaw was a gravitational field, which sucked in anything nearby. That was why it had looked like the monsters had leaped into it earlier. It took more mana than even the strongest advanced level spells to cast, but its power was proportionally more massive as well. It was clear Yue was proud of her achievement.

Meanwhile, the adventurers finally returned to their senses. They turned to Yue and all started shouting at the same time.

"Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, what was that!? What the *hell* was that!"

"Th-That thing... came from... from the sky and... I must be dreaming."

"Hehe, I'm going to get married once we get to town."

“I know we just saw something insane, but keep it together, man. You don’t even have any female friends, let alone a girlfriend.”

“I just saw magic that was alive! If living magic can exist, then I can get married!”

“Look, magic doesn’t normally spring to life, okay? That was clearly something weird.”

“What was that, you bastard!? Are you calling Yue-chan weird!?”

“Calm down, everyone! Yue-chan’s clearly just a goddess, that’s all!”

“I see!”

Yue’s spell had been so shocking that the adventurers had lost their wits. It was only natural. There was no magic in the world that could make living things. And freely manipulating a spell once it was cast was something even master magicians couldn’t do. Honestly, just being able to use the Thunder Hammer spell was something only a few genius magicians could do.

Only the leader, Gartima, managed to keep his head. He sighed as he watched the others yell out “All hail our goddess Yue!” and walked over to Hajime.

“Haah, you have my thanks. Because of Yue-chan, we avoided any casualties.”

“We’re comrades. There’s no need for thanks between comrades, right?”

“Yeah. I was just doing my job.”

“Haha, I see... So, what exactly was that?” Gartima was curious too.

“...An original.”

“W-Wait? You mean like your own original spell that you created? That looked like an advanced, no a master class spell.”

“I didn’t create it. I just merged spells.”

“Merged? But just what spells could you possibly merge to make...”

“Trade secret.”

“Well, I guess that’s fair enough. No adventurer would easily give up their trump card like that.” Gartima sighed again. It seemed not poking one’s nose in too far was an unspoken rule among adventurers. He shrugged and returned to his comrades. Hajime hoped he’d rein in his other comrades before they started the sect of

Yueism.

They resumed traveling, but now everyone looked at Yue with newfound respect.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully, and they reached Fuhren the next morning.

There were six people checking goods and identities at Fuhren's eastern gate. Hajime and the others got in one of the six lines as well. With how long it was, he guessed it would be a while before their turn.

Hajime was lying in Yue's lap atop a carriage's roof, with Shea sitting next to him, when More came up to him. It looked like he had something to say. He looked up at Hajime with a mixture of admiration and exasperation. Hajime nodded casually and jumped down.

"You sure are bold. Aren't you worried about other people seeing?" More was referring to how Hajime would earn everyone's jealousy by being so openly flirtatious with Yue and Shea. And now there were quite a few people looking at Shea hoping to sell her off because of her value. In a large city like this, it was to be expected. It wouldn't just be lewd gazes Yue and Shea would attract, but the attention of dangerous people hoping to profit off them.

"Well, it does get kind of annoying, but there's no point in worrying about it. Not like there's anything I can do." Hajime shrugged his shoulders.

"It'll only get worse once you're inside Fuhren. Are you absolutely sure you don't want to sell..." More casually tried to bring up selling Shea again, but Hajime just glared pointedly at him. Catching the hint, More raised his hands in surrender.

"That can't be all you came here to ask. What do you actually need?"

"Well, I actually did come here to buy from you. Just not the girl. I'm interested in those artifacts you possess. Is there any chance you'd be willing to sell them to me? I'd be willing to pay you enough to live out the rest of your days in luxury for even one of them. Most merchants would kill to get their hands on your artifacts, especially that Treasure Trove of yours."

More wasn't exaggerating, merchants really would kill for that. Not only would it ensure the safety of their goods, it would make them easier to transport. The two problems that constantly plagued

all traders. Hell, they'd slaughter an entire town for it if they had to.

When More had first seen Hajime take things out of the Treasure Trove, he'd looked like a starved dog that had just been shown a bone. Tired of his constant pestering, Hajime had used Intimidation to get More to reluctantly back off.

However, he hadn't given up. He had returned once more to negotiate for Hajime's artifacts, including Donner and Schlag.

"How many times do I have to say it? These aren't for sale. Give it up."

"But these artifacts are too valuable for just one person to have. Once others learn of their abilities, they'll come after you for sure. Surely you don't want to deal with the hassle that comes with carrying such precious equipment around... What if someone tried to kidnap those two girls to try and coerce you?" There was a hint of madness in More's eyes as he looked up with manic zeal at Yue and Shea. The moment he did so, however, something cold and hard was pressed against his forehead. Bloodlust oozed from Hajime's every pore.

But he kept it focused, so no one else felt it. They were hidden in the shadow of the carriage as well, so no one was watching.

"Is that a threat?" Hajime's voice was barely a whisper. But it chilled More to the bone. Hajime's single eye bored into More, his gaze a physical force. Cold sweat poured down More's back.

"N-No. Please... I... just... thought... maybe you should... be more cautious... is all..."

More did have a point. Hajime hadn't bothered trying to hide the power of his artifacts at all. He had taken some precautions, in that he'd asked Yue to chant her spells, but only just that bare minimum. He had no intention of exercising prudence if it called for any real effort on his or the girls' part. He saw no reason to conform to the expectations of this world. Anyone that got in his way, he'd kill. That was what he'd sworn he'd do back in the abyss.

"I see. I'll leave it at that, then." Hajime holstered Donner, his bloodlust vanishing. More crumpled to the ground. Rivulets of sweat cascaded from his forehead as he panted heavily.

"You're welcome to do whatever you want. You can even spread rumors about me if you'd like. I don't really care what anyone else does, either. Just know that anything that stands against me... won't live to tell the tale. Whether that be a person, a

country, or the entire world. I'll drown everything in a sea of blood if I have to."

"I-I see. I suppose this isn't a trade worth dying over..." More was still pale-faced, but he still managed to squeak out a reply. He had a surprisingly strong will. Hajime had noted he was respected among the other merchants. Normally, More wouldn't have been so insistent about Hajime's artifacts. It was just that their allure had been so great that it had overridden his good sense.

"Anyway, I'll let you go this once, but there won't be a next time. Am I clear?"

"Crystal. I apologize, I let my greed blind me. Only a fool kicks a dragon's arse, after all."

"Only a fool kicks a dragon's arse" was a saying unique to Tortus. The dragon here referred to a dragonman. Dragonmen were a race that boasted greater defensive strength than any other. Their entire body was covered in scales, and aside from their mouth and eyes, only their butts were unprotected. Because of how well protected they were, they were heavy sleepers. Unless something monumental happened, it was hard to wake them. However, if one smacked their butts, which were sensitive, they'd wake instantly and their wrath would be terrible to behold.

Once in the past, a certain moron had for some reason decided to try it. And so, the saying was born. It basically meant that only a fool would risk provoking the wrath of someone stronger than them when they could just leave them alone.

The dragonmen race had died out over five hundred years ago, though. While the exact reason was unclear, it was assumed that because they possessed the special magic "dragonification," they were considered half-monsters by the "civilized" races, so they were hunted to extinction. Another theory was that the gods themselves decided they were impure and thus were purged.

"Come to think of it, Yue-dono's magic resembled a dragon as well. As a token of my apology, let me give you a warning. It's better for people not to know that she can use such magic. The Holy Church doesn't think very fondly of dragonmen. Though I guess that looked more like a snake than a dragon, so maybe you'll be fine." More had recovered enough to get back on his feet, and he patted down his clothes as he gave that warning. He was quite the courageous businessman. It took nerves of steel to talk so casually with someone who had been about to kill you just seconds ago.

“Really?”

“Indeed. They were a half-man half-monster race, and worse, they were heretics that believed in no god. However, they were incredibly strong, far more so than humans. You can see why the Holy Church, as dogmatic as they are, would hate them so.”

“Yeah. Gotta say, you don’t sound too fond of the Holy Church yourself. You should be careful or they’ll brand you a heretic.”

“I believe in God, not the people who wield authority by claiming to speak for him. People are customers, nothing more.”

“I think I understand what kind of person you are now. You’re a merchant to the core, aren’t you? No wonder you went crazy when you saw my stuff.” Hajime fingered the ring on his finger. More’s smile was a mixture of embarrassment and pride. His manic behavior from earlier was nowhere to be seen. Hajime’s bloodlust had worked like a bucket of cold water.

“I sincerely apologize for my earlier rudeness, so I hope you will still keep my company in mind if ever you wish to broker any sort of deal, even one without artifacts. You’re no ordinary adventurer, that I can tell. Our company takes great pride in maintaining amicable connections with those who stray from the ordinary path, so I hope this incident hasn’t turned you away from us.”

“You really don’t know when to quit, do you?” Hajime chuckled tiredly. More then headed back to the front of his caravan with a “Now then, I shall be taking my leave” and a bow.

In the meantime, Yue and Shea had managed to attract even more gazes. More was already talking with another merchant, pointing animatedly at Yue and Shea. Hajime had been intending to relax a while in Fuhren, but it seemed like their stay would be more eventful than he’d expected.

The independent city-state of Fuhren. It was the largest mercantile city in the continent, guarded by thick walls that stood twenty meters high and wrapped two hundred kilometers around the entirety of the city. Craftsmen of all kinds competed ruthlessly with each other day after day to sell their wares. Some made it big and had their wildest dreams granted, while others were crushed by the dog eat dog nature of the city. With the amount of tourists and traders that came in and out of the place, it was easily the busiest in the world.

Because of its size, Fuhren was divided into four quarters. The bureaucrats' quarter, where the city's various administrative affairs were processed, the tourists' quarter, where most of the entertainment facilities were located, the makers' quarter, where weapons, armor, tools, and furniture of all kinds were made, and the traders' quarter, where goods of all kinds were sold.

Two main streets ran from east to west and north to south, intersecting in the center. Generally, the closer to the center of the city one's establishment was, the higher the quality of its services. On the other hand, the fringes of the city were filled with unlicensed black market stores selling various goods and services. Occasionally, one would become famous for its prices or wares, and a lot of rough and tumble types like adventurers or mercenaries would begin to frequent it.

Hajime and the others heard this all from a tour guide while they sat at a cafe attached to the Fuhren adventurer's guild branch, which was located in a corner of the bureaucrats' quarter. Demand for guides in the city was high because of how big it was, and it appeared being a tour guide was one of the more respectable professions in the city. As there were a number of touring agencies in the city, each of them had to compete for customers, which led to the overall quality of service to rise.

After they'd gotten through the city gates, Hajime and the others had said goodbye to More's caravan and gone to turn in their stamped request slip to the adventurer's guild. As they were new to the city, they had also hoped to find a guidebook of some kind there, which was when they'd learned about the existence of tour guides.

And so, they'd hired a guide, Rithy, who was explaining the ins and outs of the city to them over a light meal.

"So if you're looking to find an inn, I'd recommend heading to the tourists' quarter first. There are a few inns in the bureaucrat's quarter as well, but most of them are temporary lodgings for people working here, so their service isn't nearly as good as the others."

"I see. Then I guess we'll head there next. What inn do you recommend?"

"Depends on what you're looking for. Each of them focus on different services."

"Let's see. Well, the main things are that it has to have good food and a bath. Location or the like doesn't matter too much. Oh,

and if possible, I'd like somewhere where there's a guarantee."

Rithy nodded to herself as she listened to Hajime's preferences. The first two were common requests. She started making a mental list of recommendations after hearing them, in fact. However, Hajime's third request threw her off.

"A guarantee? Of what?"

"Ah, let me explain. Say, for example, we got into a dispute of some kind, and we clearly weren't the perpetrators, the inn will make those responsible pay for the damages. I want to stay somewhere decently high-end, but I want a guarantee that we won't have to pay for any broken furniture or the like if the incident is clearly not our fault."

"Umm, you shouldn't run into any trouble like that in the first place, I don't think..."

Hajime smiled awkwardly.

"Normally I'd agree, but as you can see, my two companions attract a lot of attention. And it sounds like most of the people that frequent the tourist quarter aren't exactly the restrained type. I'm worried some of the more forceful merchants might try something a bit... violent. But, well, like I said, only 'if possible.' If it's too difficult a request, then you don't have to worry about it."

Rithy looked over at the two girls sitting next to Hajime, happily chowing down on their food, then nodded.

"Those two certainly do stand out." Even now, they were attracting stares. Especially Shea, since she was a bunny girl. Assaulting another person's slave was a punishable offense, but that wouldn't stop some of the more zealous merchants, or a determined pervert.

"Would it not then be wiser to pick an inn with increased security? Since there are a lot more people who value that as a service, I can think of a few inns that provide—"

"No, that's fine. People are liable to do some pretty crazy things when they're running on hormones. Security isn't always perfect, so it's easier for me to assume we'll have to persuade them by force."

"P-Persuade them by force... I see. So that's why you want a guarantee, then."

Hajime insisted once more that in the end it was only if possible, but Rithy was a guide through and through. Now that it had been requested of her, she would see it done.

"Leave it to me," she said. Then, she asked Yue and Shea if

there was anything else they wanted out of their inn. Answering the needs of the customer to the best of her ability was both Rithy's policy, and her company's. Hajime had picked a good guide.

"I just need a bath. Oh, but the bath must have mixed bathing times."

"Umm, as long as it has big beds, I'm fine."

After giving it some thought, Yue and Shea both told her their preferences. They were trivial requests, but Rithy could clearly see what the two girls were aiming for.

She just said "Leave it to me," like before, but this time her cheeks were slightly red. As her gaze shifted back and forth between Yue, Shea, and Hajime, her face grew redder.

The guys sitting at the surrounding tables were all glaring daggers at Hajime, but he was used to it at this point, so he ignored them.

Rithy then began explaining the different quarters in more detail. Halfway through her explanation, Hajime felt a strong gaze pointed their way. It was far more impolite than any they had felt so far, including the ones they'd received from some of the perverts that had lusted after Yue and Shea in Brooke. As they had grown accustomed to such attention as well, they only raised their eyebrows slightly at it.

Hajime turned to see who was staring and saw... a pig.

There was no other way to describe him. He easily weighed over a hundred kilograms, his face was greasy, he had pig snout for a nose, and his blonde hair was slick with oil. The only thing positive about his appearance was the fancy clothes he was wearing. Said pig was glaring hungrily at Yue and Shea.

God, what a pain, Hajime thought. At the same time, the fat pig started slowly lumbering over to where they were sitting. Looks like it was too late to make a stealthy escape. Not that Hajime would ever run.

Rithy must have noticed the change in her customers' attitudes, or perhaps the fat pig simply stood out that much, but she looked up too. When she saw tub of lard walking over, she forgot her business smile and let out a disgruntled sound.

He stopped next to their table and leered at Yue and Shea. When he saw Shea's slave collar he frowned. He looked over at Hajime, as if just noticing him for the first time, and demanded the following in a haughty voice.

“H-Hey, brat. I-I’ll give you a million Luta, s-so hand over that bunny girl. And you, Blondie. C-Come with me. You’re going to be my concubine.” His stutter didn’t match his arrogant tone. He reached out to take Yue by the arm, thinking she was already his. That instant, a wave of bloodlust unlike any other washed over him. Even people sitting a few tables away balked. Some fell out of their chairs in their haste to get away from Hajime.

The walking pig, who had taken that bloodlust head on, screamed incoherently and fell on his ass. He wet himself on the spot, unable to muster the presence of mind to even crawl away.

Had Hajime activated his Intimidation at full power, the pig would have fallen unconscious instantly, so he made sure to hold back.

“Yue, Shea, let’s go. I don’t feel like staying here.” As he didn’t want his meal to be tainted by the smell of piss, Hajime opted to leave. Hajime had honestly wanted to kill the bastard, but as he hadn’t done anything more than talk to them yet, he wouldn’t really be able to justify it to the authorities. And no city would let a murderer roam free. Unless he could reasonably say it was in self-defense, Hajime wanted to avoid killing people as long as he was in a city.

The three of them stood up, with Rithy looking on in confusion. The only reason Rithy hadn’t been affected was because Hajime had specifically excluded her from his list of targets when he’d activated Intimidation. Basically, it was the opposite of when he’d focused his Intimidation on More alone. This was the fruit of his training.

From Rithy’s perspective, the pig had just started talking all high and mighty before suddenly falling on his ass and pissing himself, so her confusion was understandable.

Hajime had let the effects of his Intimidation leak out to the nearby tables on purpose. Quite a few of the guys sitting around him had been glaring longingly at the girls, so he’d decided to teach them a lesson too. “Don’t even think about it,” basically.

Judging by how pale they looked, it seemed they got the message.

Still, the moment Hajime left the guild and released his Intimidation, a huge man blocked his path. He too looked to weigh over one hundred kilograms, but for a completely different reason. His entire body was corded muscle, and a long sword that looked like it had seen its fair share of battles was strapped to his waist.

Suddenly, Hajime heard the fat pig's stuttering voice again.

"H-He's the one, Reganid! Kill that brat! H-He tried to kill me! Tear his limbs off!"

"Young Master, I cannot just kill someone in broad daylight. I'll leave him barely alive."

"Get him! I-I don't care if you don't kill him, just get him! B-But don't hurt the girls. They're mine!"

"Very well, but I expect to be well compensated."

"I-I'll give you as much as you want. Just get him!"

It appeared that this Reganid fellow was one of the pig's hired guards. He kept his eyes on Hajime the entire time he was talking, then smiled in satisfaction when the matter of money was settled. It was rare for someone to take no notice of Yue or Shea. He was more interested in the money than the two beauties standing before him.

"Sorry about this, kid. But I'm being paid to beat you up. Don't worry, I won't kill you at least. And well... sorry, but you probably won't get to see your two friends ever again." Reganid cracked his knuckles. They were in the middle of the street, so naturally he couldn't use his sword. Many of the spectators started murmuring amongst themselves when they heard the name Reganid.

"B-By Reganid, does he mean Reganid the Black?"

"R-Reganid the Gale!? Why's a guy like that working as a guard..."

"Isn't it for the money? They say Reganid'll do anything for gold."

Judging from the surrounding people's conversations, Hajime more or less figured out what kind of person Reganid was. He didn't know if Reganid had a combat class or not, but if, as his name suggested, he'd risen to the third-highest adventurer rank, black, he must be quite the experienced adventurer.

Reganid settled into a battle stance. Reasoning that he could justifiable beat to him to within an inch of his life in the name of self-defense, Hajime made to pull out Donner, but was stopped unexpectedly.

"Wait, Hajime."

"Yue? What's wrong?" Instead of answering his question, Yue dragged Shea with her in front of Hajime. With her back to Hajime, she answered his question by addressing Reganid.

"Fight us first."

"Huh? I'm fighting too, Yue-san?" Yue ignored Shea. Before

Hajime could say anything, Reganid burst out in laughter.

"Gahahaha, fight you two little girls? Now that's hilarious. I mean I wouldn't mind fighting you in bed, but—"

"Shut up, trash."

Reganid's inappropriate comment was cut short by a blade of wind slicing past his cheek. Blood spurted out of the wound in large gouts. It must have been a pretty deep cut.

Reganid obediently shut up. Yue's magic had been so fast that he hadn't even seen it coming.

When did she chant the spell? How come I didn't even see a magic circle? Reganid's brain worked on overdrive, trying to figure out what had just happened.

Yue turned back to Shea and Hajime to explain what she was doing.

"It'll be faster if we show everyone else that we're not weak little girls that need protecting."

"Oh, I see. We're showing off that we're just as strong too."

"Yeah. We might as well do this too." Yue raised a hand toward Reganid and glared sharply at him.

"Ah, I get it now. Well, it would be nice to show everyone the princesses they're trying to claim are actually ferocious tigers. Plus, we've got plenty of witnesses here... Yeah that's a pretty good plan."

"You didn't have to add the ferocious part."

Hajime nodded in understanding, then stepped back.

Yue then nodded to Shea, signaling that it was her turn. Shea grabbed Drucken off her back, then swung it casually through the air as if it weighed nothing.

"Hold up, are you serious, bunny girl? You know, my employer wants you two unharmed, so I'd prefer if you'd just quietly came along." Reganid kept his eyes on Yue the whole time he was talking to Shea. Shea replied to Reganid's warning with one of her own.

"Don't you think you should draw that sword of yours? I'll be holding back, but I don't want to break too many of your bones."

"Hah, big words for a rabbitman. Sorry, but I'm gonna have to rough these two up a little bit."

Reganid's focus was still almost wholly concentrated on Yue. With how fast she'd cast her spell, he didn't think he'd be able to take her unharmed.

However, Reganid should have paid more attention to Shea.

Warning bells should have gone off the moment he'd seen a rabbitman, a race known for being weak, waving around a war hammer. Furthermore, Yue and Hajime had both decided to let her deal the first real blow of this fight.

Shea didn't say anything. Instead, she just pulled Drucken back close to her hip and leaped forward. She was in front of Reganid before he even had time to blink.

"Hm!?"

"Yaah!" Shea's hammer headed for Reganid's chest with blinding speed. Though she looked cute, her attacks were anything but. Surprised, Reganid still managed to barely get his arms up in time to block. *I can't stop it!?* Realizing he would be blown back, he quickly tried to cushion the blow by backstepping. However, the hammer was faster than his reaction time.

There was a sickening crack, and Reganid was blown back into the wall of the adventurer's guild. The air burst from his lungs and he let out a strangled cough. He saw Shea looked down at him in disappointment through his hazy vision. It seemed she'd expected a little more from him.

It was laughable that a black-ranked adventurer like him was not only beaten by a little bunny girl, but she'd even held back on him. Plus, it looked like she'd been disappointed with his performance. He smiled self-deprecatingly, then winced at the pain it caused him. He made one last effort to get to his feet, but the pain was too great and he collapsed. He turned his head and saw that his arm had been completely crushed.

Luckily, it looked like only one of his arms had been shattered, so he tried to lift himself with his other good arm. His vision was blurring at the edges now, but he somehow managed to get to his feet. Though it hadn't done much, had he not attempted that backstep at all back there, then he probably would have been sprawled on the ground unconscious already.

Though falling unconscious might have saved him from the pain to come.

Reganid was standing on willpower alone, so when he saw Yue coldly thrust out her hand at him, he despaired internally.

Man, this isn't worth what you're paying me... A second later, Reganid had the very unique and terrifying experience of literally dancing through the air.

"Petals of wind, dance and scatter— Flurry Waltz!" This was

another one of Yue's original spells, made by combining gravity magic with the wind spell, Air Cannon. As its name suggested, Air Cannon created balls of wind to bombard the enemy. Gravity magic allowed Yue to manipulate those balls freely. Additionally, the gravitational field surrounding them meant anyone struck would be continually spun around the ball until the spell vanished. Then, once they were crucified in the air, the helpless opponent was made an easy target for other skills. Like before, the chant she'd spoken was nonsense.

After Reganid was flung around in the air like a rag doll, he fell to the ground with a wet thud and lay there unmoving.

He had, in fact, lost consciousness after the first few wind balls had hit him, but whether Yue had realized that or not, she had mercilessly bombarded him with the full spell, hitting his balls more often than not. The nearby spectators had all winced and covered their own balls. It had looked painful enough that even Hajime had winced a little.

The onlookers had just witnessed two impossible events one after the other. Silence reigned on the street. No one dared to so much as twitch. Some of the guild staff that had come out to stop the fight were frozen in place, their hands outstretched. Even the veteran adventurers were too shocked to say anything.

Finally, the silence was broken. Hajime's footsteps echoed across the cobblestones as he walked forward. Everyone's eyes followed him. He stopped right in front of the pig.

"Hiii! S-Stay back! Wh-Who do you think I am!? I'm Poom Min! You think you'll be able to get away after harming a member of the Min family!?"

"Apologize to all the pig mascot fans in the world, you damn hog." Hajime grimaced as he thought about how the Poom's name resembled a certain famous mascot character back on earth, as he stepped angrily on Poom's face.

"Oink!?" He even let out a pig-like squeal when he screamed. Hajime bore down harder, until he could hear Poom's skull cracking.

The more Poom screamed, the harder Hajime pushed. His face was a mess now, his nose broken and his eyes pushed into his skull. Poom finally quieted down when he realized his screaming was only making it worse. Or maybe he'd just exhausted himself.

"Hey, pig. Don't ever show your face to me again. You ever try

to do anything to me again, directly or not... and I'll kill you." Poom desperately tried to nod, his face still stuck underneath Hajime's foot. He didn't even try to act tough. His pride had been completely shattered.

However, Hajime wasn't satisfied with just that. Letting this pig live happily once this incident was past was just too lenient for his taste. Since Hajime couldn't just kill him, he'd just have to carve terror so deeply into his soul that the pig would never recover.

And so, he raised his foot a little, transmuting his soles into spikes. Then, he drove his foot into Poom's face once more.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!" The spikes drilled countless holes into Poom's face. Poom let out a single high-pitched squeal before losing consciousness. After Hajime moved his foot, Poom's ugly face was exposed for all to see... Well, his face had already been ugly, but now it was covered in blood too.

Finally satisfied, Hajime walked back to Yue and Shea. They were waiting for him with a smile, seemingly unaffected by the carnage all around them. Hajime smiled at his tour guide, Rithy, as well.

"Now then, shall we head somewhere else?"

"Hiii! U-Umm, I, well..." Terrified, Rithy tried to compose herself. It was obvious from her expression that she wanted nothing to do with them any longer. That was how intimidating Hajime and the others' display of force had been.

Hajime understood that he'd probably scarred their current tour guide, but he didn't really feel like searching for a new one after all the commotion that had happened. Realizing Hajime didn't want to let this guide escape, Yue and Shea causally walked to either side of her and took her by the arms.

Rithy let out another terrified scream. But then her savior, the guild attendant, finally showed up.

"Umm, excuse me, but would you be willing to answer a few questions for us?" Three other guild attendants warily surrounded Hajime. None of them looked eager to get close. The crowd had begun to grow, as more people came to look at what had happened to Poom and Reganid.

"Well, that pig over there tried to kidnap my companions. When I tried to stop him he went crazy and ordered his guard to attack me, so I fought back. That's all there is to it. This tour guide and all those spectators are witnesses. Especially those guys sitting

at the tables over there, they seem to enjoy eavesdropping." Hajime glared at the men that had been listening in earlier, and they all nodded vigorously, fearing Hajime might tear their heads off.

"I understand, but as this happened on guild property, we need to go through the proper procedure. Both sides need to present their case so justice can be dispensed... Those are the rules, so if you would just be so kind as to..."

"Both sides, huh?" Hajime glanced over to where Poom and Reganid were lying. It didn't look like either of them would regain consciousness anytime soon. The guild had sent some medics over to treat them, but he doubted they'd wake up for another few days at least.

"You want us to wait in the guild until they wake up? Even though we were the victims...? You've gotta be kidding me. Maybe I should just drag them out of the city and kill them there." Hajime glared angrily at the guild attendant. He looked just like an American ready to sue someone.

"Please don't glare at me like that, I'm just doing my job," the attendant said in a panicked voice. But when Hajime suggested killing them, he still diligently tried to stop him.

Grumbling to himself, Hajime decided to try and forcibly wake the two up. The guild attendants were in the middle of trying to stop him when a new voice cut through the crowd.

"What are you doing? What's going on here?" A slender man in glasses stared sternly down at Hajime.

"Chief Secretary Dott! Perfect timing! You see..." The attendants all rejoiced at the appearance of this man called Dott. After he listened to their explanation of what happened, he returned his sharp gaze to Hajime.

Looks like things are just getting more and more complicated. Hajime sighed to himself.

Dott adjusted his glasses with his middle finger and calmly addressed Hajime.

"I more or less understand the situation now. And it appears there really are quite a few witnesses. I do think you might have overdone it a little, but... well, they're still alive, so it's fine. I was hoping you would at least be willing to stay inside Fuhren until they wake up. May I at least ask for your identification and the address you're be staying at... I'm sure that's not too much to ask, right?" His tone was surprisingly firm. Hajime shrugged his

shoulders.

"Yeah, that's fine. In fact, if that pig starts causing trouble again, I'd like you to contact me. I'll be gentler next time, don't worry." Hajime tiredly handed over his status plate.

"As for where we're staying, we haven't decided yet, so... ask that tour guide over there. We were planning on staying wherever she recommended."

Rithy got a little startled when Hajime mentioned her name, then sadly muttered, "I guess I'm stuck guiding you after all..."

"Hmm, very well... I see your rank is blue. That man lying on ground over there is black... May I ask for your two companions' status plates as well?" Dott raised his eyebrows when he saw Hajime's rank was only blue, the lowest rank. But since the eyewitnesses had said it was Yue and Shea who had defeated Reganid, he thought maybe they were a lot stronger.

"Well, Yue and Shea both lost their status plates, and we haven't been able to get replacements yet. I mean, they're pretty expensive, aren't they?" Hajime lied without batting an eyelid. Hiding their strength after they'd displayed so much of it already was pointless, but Hajime still wanted to avoid letting anyone know exactly what they were capable of.

"However, we must confirm their identities. In the event that you start constantly causing trouble for the guild, regardless of whether you're the victim or the aggressor, we will need to blacklist you. Thus, we need a record. If you would like, the guild will pay for their replacements." It appeared Dott wished to confirm their identity no matter what.

But if Hajime got them new status plates now, he wouldn't have time to hide their stats and skills column. Everyone would see they could use special magic. Worse, they'd know they both could use magic from the age of the gods. There was no doubt in his mind that it would cause a huge uproar. Even if that did happen, Hajime wouldn't mind killing everyone that came after them. The problem was that it would make it impossible for them to stay in towns anymore.

Man, this whole thing's turning into more of a pain than I'd have liked. As if reading his thoughts, Yue offered a suggestion.

"Hajime, the letter."

"Huh? Oh yeah, that letter..."

Yue was, of course, talking about the letter Catherine had given

them before they'd left Brooke. The one Catherine had said would help them out if they ever got into any trouble with other adventurer's guild branches.

Not like we have anything to lose. Hajime pulled the letter out of his pocket and gave it to Dott, thinking they could just flee town if things really turned south. After all, while Catherine had explained what it would do, he had no idea what was actually written in it. He regretted not checking the contents now.

"I'm not sure if this will work in place of identification, but a friend of ours from another guild branch told us to show this to someone high ranking if we found ourselves in any trouble."

"Hm? A friend from another guild branch...? Let me take a look." Dott found it somewhat suspicious that Hajime was unwilling to pay for new status plates considering he and his companions were rather well dressed and didn't seem strapped for money. However, he still obediently took the letter and skimmed through his contents. When he reached the end, he let out a startled gasp.

His gaze shifted from the letter to the trio multiple times. With the way he kept poring over the words, it looked like he was trying to determine the authenticity of the letter.

Finally, he folded it back up and placed it neatly into the envelope it had come in.

"If this letter is authentic, then it will indeed serve as identification... However, I myself am unable to determine whether the sender is really who she claims she is. I shall confirm the details with our branch chief, so could you please wait inside the guild until? I promise it won't take long. Ten, fifteen minutes at most."

Who on earth is Catherine, really?

"Alright, if it's only that long I don't mind. We'll wait."

"The attendants can guide you to a waiting room. I'll be back shortly." Dott called an attendant over and instructed him to guide them before vanishing inside the guild building. The attendant motioned for Hajime and the others to follow him. As Hajime and the others followed after him, Rithy asked him a question in a confused, but somewhat hopeful voice.

"Umm, what should I do?" Since they were now entangled with the guild, she was hoping she wouldn't have to guide them anymore. With how dangerous they seemed, she wanted to be free of them as soon as possible.

Hajime nodded and replied to her question with some questions

of his own.

"Wait for us... You won't run, right? You're a professional, right?"

"Okay..." Rithy drooped her head sadly and went to sit down on one of the empty chairs in the cafe. No matter what world one was in, employees had to take on unpleasant jobs for their company.

Ten minutes after Hajime and the others were led to the waiting room, there was a knock on the door. Hajime called for whoever it was to come in, and the door opened. Dott entered the room, accompanied by a man in his late thirties. He had slicked back blond hair and a discerning look in his eyes.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am the head of the Fuhren branch's adventurer's guild, Ilwa Chang. You three are... Hajime-kun, Yue-kun, and Shea-kun, correct?" Ilwa introduced himself and offered his hand to Hajime. He shook it and responded.

"Yeah, that's right. Were our names in that letter?"

"They were indeed. My old master's letter told... or rather, warned me about you three. She said that you show a great deal of promise, but that you're rather troublesome kids, so we should keep an eye on you."

"Troublesome, huh? I guess Brooke *was* nothing but trouble. Well, whatever. Does that letter settle our identification issues or no?"

"Yes, she said that you three aren't a threat to the guild, so that's good enough for me. She's a very good judge of character. If it's a letter from her, it'll serve as sufficient identification. After all, she wouldn't write one for people of dubious character."

It seemed Catherine really did hold a lot of clout with the guild. *Everyone really trusts her. Since Ilwa called her his master, they must know each other pretty well.* Shea seemed especially curious about Ilwa's relationship with Catherine. She'd gotten along rather well with the old lady, so it made sense.

"Umm, what kind of person is Catherine-san?"

"You didn't ask her yourself? She used to be the chief secretary of the adventurer's guild's main branch. After that she became a guild instructor. More than half of all the branch chiefs learned their trade from her."

Hajime looked up in surprise. Smiling wryly, Ilwa continued.

"I was one of them. Though I'm nowhere near her level. Back then her unparalleled beauty and skill captivated everyone who

studied under her. Later she ended up getting married and transferred to the Brooke branch. She said she preferred to raise her kids in the countryside. Her marriage announcement was really sudden too. I was pretty shocked when I heard it. In fact, the whole guild, no the whole capital was."

"Haah, I didn't realize she was such an amazing person."

"Yeah... Catherine's incredible."

"I knew she wasn't just some ordinary old lady... but to think she was that important. So if she was so good looking back then, how come... Actually, never mind."

Yue and Shea were astounded to discover just how impressive Catherine had been. Only Hajime looked away wistfully, lamenting what the ravages of time had done.

"Well anyway, if there's no problem with identification then we're free to go right?" Hajime had only agreed to wait so that they could get their identification issues resolved, and now that they had been, he saw no reason to stay. However, Ilwa's eyes sparkled mischievously as he called out to them.

"Actually, could you please wait a moment?"

Hajime felt a sense of foreboding.

Ilwa gestured to Dott, who handed Hajime a certain request flyer.

"The truth is, we were impressed by your skill so we were hoping you would be willing to undertake a task for us."

"No thanks."

Hajime refused instantly and made to leave. Yue and Shea followed suit, but Ilwa's next words brought them back.

"Hmm, are you sure you won't even listen to what it is? We'll overlook this whole incident if you agree to just listen."

"....."

That of course had the unsaid implication that they would make this whole affair far more of a pain than it had to be if he didn't stay to listen.

Thanks to all of the eyewitness testimony, Hajime and the others wouldn't be charged with a crime. But because of how overboard they'd gone, the guild could force them into a long and tedious hearing about what had happened and require an account from both sides.

In the end, they'd still probably not be punished, but it would still waste a great deal of their time. And if they ignored the guild's

orders, they'd be blacklisted everywhere. Not being able to access the information at various guild branches would be rather inconvenient.

Hajime glared at Ilwa for a moment. He'd only asked that they hear him out, not that they accept the request. If that was all it took to avoid weeks of legal proceedings, then it wasn't such a bad deal. Hajime sat back down.

"So you'll listen. Thank you."

"You're not a branch chief for nothing I see. You're pretty gutsy."

"I could say the same to you. Now then, as you can see on the flyer, this particular request is to search for some missing people. Some time back, a party of adventurers set off to investigate the northern mountain range. When they didn't return, one of the adventurers' family put out a search request."

The rest of Ilwa's explanation could be boiled down to the following:

There had been reports of increased monster activity in the northern regions, so the guild had issued an investigation quest.

Only the mountain nearest to town was well charted, the rest of the range was marked simply as wilderness. While they weren't as strong as ones encountered in the labyrinths, the mountains were still inhabited by powerful monsters. So the party that had accepted that request had been rather high rank. However, before they embarked someone else had begged to join them. They were rather forceful in their entreaties, and in the end they were allowed to tag along.

This newcomer was the third son of the noble Cudeta family, Will Cudeta. Count Cudeta had secretly sent someone to follow after his son, who'd basically ran away from home to become an adventurer. But even the person he'd sent to tail his son had vanished, so he had sent out a search request to the guild.

"The count sent out his own independent search party as well, but he asked the guild for help because he wanted as many people out looking as possible. This all happened just yesterday. The party that had gone out to investigate was among the most experienced in the guild, so if they ran into something they couldn't handle, most adventurers wouldn't stand a chance. So the only people we can afford to send out on this quest are those of considerable skill. However those that fill that criteria are all out on other quests at

the moment. Fortunately for us, you happened to show up just at the right time."

"I thought you needed people of considerable skill? Sadly I'm just a blue rank adventurer."

Ilwa didn't fall for Hajime's feeble attempt at feigning weakness.

"You just took out Reganid, a black rank adventurer without even breaking a sweat. Besides... anyone who can survive down at the bottom of the Reisen Gorge can't be that weak."

"How did you... The letter? But I never told Catherine..."

Hajime hadn't told anyone they'd gone to explore the Reisen Gorge. The only way Ilwa would have known that was if it was written in the letter. But then that begged the question of how Catherine had learned of their trip. As Hajime was scratching his head in confusion, Shea timidly raised her hand.

Hajime looked suspiciously at Shea.

"What is it?"

"Well, I may have accidentally told her... Tehe?"

"Looks like I'll need to punish you later."

"Y-Yue-san was with me too!"

"Shea, you traitor."

"Guess I'm punishing both of you."

So it was Yue and Shea's fault. While both of them looked outwardly calm, they were sweating at the thought of what Hajime might do to them. Ilwa smiled knowingly and continued.

"It's unlikely any of them are still alive, but the possibility isn't zero. The count is a personal friend of mine, so I'd like to begin the search as soon as possible. Please. There's no one else I can ask. Will you please accept the request?"

It was obvious from his tone that Ilwa was very personally invested in this particular request. If he was friends with the count, it was quite possible he was close to the missing Will as well. He was probably just as worried for their safety.

"I get that, but we're in the middle of our own journey too. We only stopped here because it was on our way. The northern mountains are pretty far out of our way, so I'm afraid I'll have to refuse." Hajime could care less about some noble's brat. Ilwa must have realized that as well, since he headed Hajime off before he could get up.

"I promise you'll be rewarded handsomely. There'll be a bonus

from me waiting for you along with the reward already offered. I'll even raise your rank. Considering your skills, I could even bump you up to black in one go."

"To be honest, I don't need that much money, and I don't really care about my rank."

"Then how about this? If you ever get into any trouble with the guild from here on out, I'll personally vouch for all of you. The title of Fuhren's branch chief holds a lot of clout you know. And I have a lot of personal connections within the guild as well. You three seem to attract quite a lot of trouble so it's not a bad deal, right?"

"You're being quite generous. I can't imagine it's worth going that far just for your friend's son."

For the first time, Ilwa's facade of calm crumbled. He looked deeply remorseful.

"Well... the one who recommended Will take that particular request was me. I was the one who also convinced the party to let him join. While it was a rather difficult request, I thought he would be fine if he was together with a strong party. He'd never actually fought before, you see. From the start, Will was never interested in living a noble's life. He always dreamed of being an adventurer... Sadly, he didn't possess the requisite qualities for one. So I hoped that by sending him on a mission together with a strong party, he'd see the dangers adventurers face, and realize he wasn't fit for such a life. That he'd give up on becoming an adventurer. I've known the boy for quite some time, you see... that's why I wanted him to see his limits and give up, but..." Hajime lapsed into thought as he listened to Ilwa pour his heart out. *Ilwa and Will are even closer than I thought then. He tried to look calm, but it's obvious he's really desperate.* After all, the longer it took to find them, the greater the likelihood that they had died in the meantime. The fact that he'd offered such an extravagant reward was proof that Ilwa was starting to run out of options.

Hajime was starting to get tired of making excuses for Yue and Shea's lack of status plates, and having the support of an influential guild member would make their future town visits a lot less of a hassle.

Especially since Hajime had no interest in playing pretend believer for the Holy Church, so there was no telling when they'd brand him a heretic. When that did inevitably happen, it would make traveling between towns rather inconvenient. But if he had

guild connections, they might be able to help with that issue as well.

After weighing his options, Hajime decided it would be more beneficial to explain his circumstances to Ilwa, make sure he wouldn't speak about them to others, and use his influence to deal with any problems that might arise. *Considering how much he seems to care for this Will guy, he probably wouldn't turn on us if we brought him back alive.*

"If you're willing to go that far for him, I guess I might be willing to do it... but I have two conditions."

"Conditions?"

"Yeah. They're nothing huge. First, I'd like you to get status plates for Yue and Shea. And I want you to swear not to tell anyone what you see displayed there. Second, regardless of whether they're part of the guild or not, I want access to all of your connections. Those are my two conditions."

"You're asking quite a lot..."

"If you can't do it, then the deal's off. We'll be continuing on our way."

Hajime stood up for the third time, and Ilwa and Dott held their heads in anguish. The first condition wasn't a big deal, but the second one would effectively turn a branch chief into a single adventurer's lackey. Considering his position, it wasn't a request he could easily acquiesce to.

"What exactly would you ask for using my connections?"

"Don't look so worried. I'm not going to ask for anything crazy. It's just we're a bit... special, I guess, so the Holy Church won't think too kindly of us if they find out. And they'll probably find out eventually, so it'd help to have someone on our side when that happens. I just want you to help us out if we ever get stuck in any trouble is all. Basically let us use your facilities and the like even if we become wanted."

"You're certain you'll be wanted by the Holy Church eventually? Hmm, I'm beginning to grow interested in just what secrets you three bear. Since Master Catherine has taken a liking to you I doubt you're bad people, but... come to think of it, the eyewitness reports did say that Shea-kun over there possessed monstrous strength, and that Yue-kun used some new form of magic. Are the secrets you're hiding related to that...? And they are the reason you're so sure the Holy Church will probably try and

purge you... Judging by how little pains you seem to be taking to hiding them, you were prepared for a confrontation from the start. If that really is the case, I can see why you'd need my assistance to move freely between cities... hence your request..." *I guess he's not a branch chief just for show. He's sharp.* After contemplating for a while, Ilwa finally came to a decision and turned to Hajime.

"We absolutely cannot support you in any potentially criminal endeavors. I will personally need to hear the particulars of each request and decide then whether or not we will aid you. But I do promise that we will help you in any other way possible... That's the most I can offer. What do you say?"

"Well, makes sense... That's fine. As for the reward, we'll take it once we complete the mission. I just have to bring the kid back, right? Or his remains if he's dead."

Hajime's main goal had just been getting status plates for Yue and Shea. Hajime was getting tired of making up excuses for why they didn't have any, so it would be more convenient for any future stops in towns if they both got one.

The problem was making sure whoever issued them didn't cause a fuss when they first saw both of their stats... but Ilwa's appearance had solved that issue.

Of course, even if Ilwa did promise not to say anything, there was no guarantee he'd keep his word. Eventually their unique traits would become public knowledge, but Hajime preferred to keep them secret for as long as possible. Hence why he had decided to claim his reward once the request was complete. Whether for good or ill, Hajime would give Ilwa closure on the matter that had been tormenting him thus far. Hopefully that would make him feel indebted to Hajime and therefore more likely to keep his mouth shut.

Ilwa had of course guessed Hajime's aim in offering to wait until he completed the request. He smiled wryly, but internally he was relieved just to have found someone both capable and willing to take on the request.

"I'm growing more curious about your secrets by the minute, but... I suppose I'll leave it for when you return. As you said, Hajime-kun, all you need to do is find any traces of Will, regardless of whether he's alive or dead... Hajime-kun, Yue-kun, Shea-kun. Please find him." With a serious expression, Ilwa bowed his head. The head of a major city's guild branch, lowering his head to an

adventurer. Not a sight you saw every day. It looked like he'd learned proper manners from Catherine too.

Hajime and the others stood up and said casually,

"Sure."

"Okay."

"We will."

They received a token amount of funds to get supplies, a letter of invitation to the guild branch to the nearby lake town that rested at the foot of the mountain, and documents detailing the request the previous adventurer party had taken on from Ilwa, and then left the guild room.

The door closed with a soft thud. Ilwa breathed a long sigh as he stared at the door. Dott, who'd been silent until now, finally spoke, his voice full of concern.

"Was that... really alright, Chief? Agreeing to those conditions?"

"Will's life is at stake. And there's no one else we can rely on. I had no other choice. Besides, they agreed to let me ultimately be the one to decide whether or not to assist them for each matter. There's no problem there. And most importantly, I'm curious about what they're hiding..."

"You mean the information their status plates would reveal, the stuff they would find 'inconvenient' if it was publicly known?"

"Mhmm. Dott-kun. Did you hear about how the heroes summoned in the Heiligh Kingdom all had ridiculous stats?"

Dott suddenly opened his eyes wide.

"Chief, do you mean to suggest that he's one of the heroes summoned by god? But he sounded as if he was practically at war with the Holy Church. I thought the heroes were all under the Holy Church's supervision?"

"Indeed they are. However... I heard that around four months ago, one member of their party died within the Orcus Labyrinth. Or more specifically that he fell to its depths along with a fearsome monster."

"...Do you mean to suggest that perhaps he survived? Four months ago even the hero's party was still inexperienced when it came to combat. I'm not sure what kind of place the bottom of Orcus is like, but I can't imagine a kid surviving through all that."

Dott shook his head in disbelief. However Ilwa continued staring at the door Hajime had left through, an amused expression on his face.

“True. But, if that really did happen... why wouldn’t he return to his comrades? Why embark on a separate journey? What did he see at the bottom of the abyss? What did he learn in that bottomless darkness?”

“You mean... perhaps...”

“Yes. Whatever it was, it seems to have convinced him to oppose the Holy Church. That is to say, oppose this world itself. His goal is worth that much.”

“The world itself...”

“Personally, I would like to be on the side of someone like that. Even if that means pitting myself against the Holy Church or the royal kingdom. I have no doubt my master noticed the same thing, which is why she gave him that letter.”

“Chief... just make sure you don’t get in too deep, okay?”

“I’ll be careful.”

They were talking about events on a scale they could scarcely imagine, but Dott still had the presence of mind to warn his boss not to bite off more than he could chew. However, Ilwa was deep in thought and only gave an absentminded reply.

Running straight through the middle of a vast plain was a road that ran due north.

Though it was called a road, it was more a path that had been paved into a highway by centuries of footfalls. As the carriages of this world didn’t have any suspensions, travelers often found themselves nursing sore bottoms by the end of their trip.

And yet, a single silhouette was rushing down this rugged road at a speed unthinkable for how poorly maintained it was. A black frame with two wheels, and three passengers sitting atop it.

Hajime, Yue, and Shea. They were pounding down the uneven road at a speed many times faster than when they had been traveling through Reisen Gorge. Hajime was easily doing eighty kilometers an hour. Without anything to inhibit his mana, Hajime was able to power Steiff to its full speed.

They were sitting in the same formation as always. Yue on Hajime’s lap, with Shea sitting behind him. Shea’s bunny ears were rippling in the wind.

The sky was clear and the sun warm upon their backs. Yue had even lessened the force of the wind pressure, making the ride quite pleasant. Yue and Shea were fully enjoying the weather, basking in the sun’s warm glow and the gentle breeze that flew past.

“Haau, it feels great. Yue-saaaan. Can we switch spots on the way back?”

“No. This is my spot.”

“Come on, don’t be stingy. Let’s swap. It’s pretty nice back here too you know.”

It was clear from Shea’s relaxed tone that she didn’t really care if she got to switch or not. Hajime turned around and answered in Yue’s place.

“You know there’s no way you’d be able to fit here, right? You’d get in the way of my driving. Those rabbit ears especially. They’d keep flopping around in the wind and hitting my eyes.”

“Oh yeah, you’re riiiiight.”

“She actually fell asleep.”

It appeared the weather was so pleasant that Shea had dozed off. Her head drooped forward, landing on Hajime’s shoulder. The rest of her body weight was pressed against his back. She’d already been half-asleep when she’d called out to Yue.

“Well at this rate I’d say we’ve got about half a day’s travel left. We’ll be driving nonstop, so might as well let her rest while she can.” As Hajime had said, they were about half a day’s ride out from the lakeside village that sat at the foot of the mountain range. If they kept this pace they’d arrive by evening. Hajime’s plan was to spend the night in town and begin searching the next morning.

The reason he was in such a rush was because the longer he took, the more likely it was that Will and his party might be dead. Yue looked up at him questioningly. It was unusual for Hajime to take such a vested interest in the life of someone he didn’t care about.

Hajime met her inquisitive gaze and smiled wryly at her.

“...Why the rush?”

“Well, better we find him alive right? That way Ilwa will feel even more indebted to us. From here on out I’m sure we’re going to get into a lot more fights with the Heiligh Kingdom and the Holy Church. So the more allies we have the better. It’d be a pain to have to fight every time we want to go anywhere.”

“I see.”

That being said, Hajime wasn’t sure how useful Ilwa would prove as an ally. In fact, he thought it was more likely Ilwa wouldn’t be of much help at all. But it never hurt to have extra assistance. Especially considering how little effort it would take to

recruit Ilwa to their cause.

"Oh yeah, I heard the village we're going to sits next to a lake, so they have a lot of water available. Apparently thanks to that they've become the largest cultivator of rice on the continent."

"Rice?"

"Yep, rice. You know, that white grain. It's my homeland's staple crop. I haven't had a single chance to eat it since coming here. I'm not sure if the rice here is the same as the one from home, but I want to try it."

"...Mmm. I want to try it now too... What's the town's name?"

Yue smiled as she watched Hajime reminisce fondly about his hometown. Her question brought Hajime back to the present, and he replied in a somewhat embarrassed tone.

"The lakeside town of Ur," he said, not knowing what troubles were already brewing there...

"Haah, no clues today either. Where could you have gone, Shimizu-kun..." Walking dejectedly down the main street of Ur was none other than the summoned teacher, Aiko Hatayama. Her normally cheerful demeanor was nowhere to be seen. Right now she just looked tortured with worry. Even the street lamps somehow seemed dimmer than usual.

"Ai-chan-sensei, don't look so down. We still don't know what might have happened. His room didn't look like it had been ransacked, so it's possible he just left somewhere on his own. So don't worry about stuff that might not even have happened."

"That's right, Aiko. Don't just keep brooding over the worst case scenario. All that does is make you less focused on what you should be doing right now. Besides, Yukitoshi is a skilled magician. Even if he did run into something dangerous, he wouldn't be beaten that easily. You're his teacher, Aiko. If you won't believe in your students, who will?"

Yuka and David both tried to cheer Aiko up. The other hunk knights and the rest of the students were standing nearby. They too expressed their concern for Aiko.

Two weeks had passed since one of Aiko's escorts, Yukitoshi Shimizu, had gone missing. Aiko and the others had expended every effort to search for him, but they hadn't been able to find a single clue. No one in town had seen him disappear, nor had anyone from the nearby villages when they'd sent people to go and ask.

At first people had been worried he might have been caught up in some kind of incident. However, when they examined his room, they'd found it undisturbed. Shimizu was a powerful black mage, skilled at using dark magic, and reasonably proficient with the other elements as well, so he wouldn't have had any problems dealing with regular thugs or the weak monsters in the immediate area. Furthermore, he had vanished multiple times before without telling anyone, so his disappearances weren't anything new.

Shimizu was by nature an introvert, and didn't really mingle with most of the other guards. He didn't have any close friends among his classmates either, and they'd actually been surprised when he'd volunteered to join the Ai-chan defense force.

Which is why most of the students were more concerned for Aiko, who was worrying herself sick, than Shimizu.

They had already reported this to the Holy Church, who had organized a search squad and dispatched them already. They were slated to arrive soon. Shimizu had one of the highest aptitudes for magic among the summoned heroes, so unlike with Hajime, they had a vested interest in confirming his safety. At their current pace, the search squad would arrive in a few more days.

Her students' words of comfort did nothing to easy Aiko's mental anguish. In fact, they made it worse. Regardless of whether he'd been caught up in some kind of incident or chosen to vanish on his own, Aiko was still worried.

But she shouldn't have let that worry show. Because she had, now she'd made the remaining students even more concerned for her. How could she still call herself an educator if she was the one constantly being looked after? Aiko sucked in a deep breath and lightly slapped her cheeks.

"Everyone, I'm sorry for worrying you. You're right. Sitting here wringing my hands won't achieve anything. Shimizu-kun is a skilled mage. I'm sure he's fine. We just have to keep believing he's safe, and do all we can to find him. But first, we need dinner! We can't search for him on an empty stomach after all!" It was obvious she was just forcing herself to sound cheerful, but her students still meekly went along with her suggestion. David and the other knights watched with a smile on their faces.

A bell clanged loudly as Aiko opened the door to the inn they were staying at. It was the poshest inn in Ur, the Water Sprite Inn. The name seemed to be a throwback to the time a water sprite

couple from the Urdea Lake had stayed there.

Urdea Lake itself was quite famous too, as it was the continent's largest lake. In terms of size, it was easily four times as large as Biwa Lake in Japan. Ur had grown up around it.

The first floor of the inn served as a pub, and it served some of the best rice dishes, Ur's specialty, around. While the interior wasn't exactly ostentatious, it was evident that a great amount of attention to detail had gone into the decorating, and the magnificent tables and bar counter gave the room a dignified atmosphere. There was a modest yet tasteful chandelier hanging from the ceiling, adding a slightly elegant touch to the room.

If one were to sum it up in a single phrase, it was an inn with a longstanding history.

At first, Aiko and the other students had protested against staying in such a fancy inn, claiming they wouldn't be able to sleep easily surrounded by such opulence. However, David and the others couldn't afford to let the Holy Church's reputation suffer by letting "god's messengers" or the "fertility goddess" stay anywhere less than the best, and eventually they managed to convince the students.

As they'd already spent some time resting in the royal palace, the students found they were more at home surrounded by such luxury than they'd thought, and they quickly took a liking to the inn. They had come to look forward to the rice dinners the inn served after a hard day of improving the town's agriculture or searching for Shimizu.

They all headed to the table in the back, the one reserved for VIP customers, and eagerly settled into their meal.

"Man, their food always smells so goood. I never thought I'd be able to eat curry in a world like this."

"Though it looks more like stew than curry, really... Wait, isn't there that white curry thing they eat in some places?"

The students all sang the praises of this otherworldly curry. Noboru pointed rudely with his chopsticks as he gave his own impressions of his own dish, an aromatic bowl of rice topped with deep-fried meat and vegetables and slathered in rich sauce.

"Man, their rice bowls are great too. Like this sauce is amazing. Hell, I don't even think Japan's got bowls this good."

"You just never had good rice bowls in Japan, Aikawa-kun. The ones from convenience stores aren't going to match up obviously."

“This fried rice is the only thing for me. I don’t think I can go back to eating anything else.”

“Their dumplings are amazing too. I swear, whoever runs this place has to be Japanese.”

The boy who contradicted Noboru retorted with a smile, while Akito stuffed himself full of fried rice. Next to him, Nana was eating her dumplings with relish.

Yuka and the others were overjoyed to be eating Japanese-style food every night.

While it didn’t taste exactly the same, the core ingredients that went into the dishes were quite similar. Part of the reason Ur’s cooking was so renowned was because of the abundance of fresh produce they had access to. Not only did they grow all of their rice, their fish came fresh from the lake, and they were able to harvest various herbs and spices from the nearby mountains.

An elderly man looking to be in his sixties and sporting a magnificent mustache came up to their table with a smile.

“How is everyone finding their meal? If there’s anything at all you require, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Oh, if it isn’t the innkeeper.”

He was Foss Seluo, the owner of the Water Sprite Inn. He stood with his back ramrod straight, but his gaze was gentle. His grizzled white hair was swept back neatly.

He fit the relaxed yet dignified atmosphere of the inn to a T.

“The food is wonderful. All of us are healed by the meals you provide us every day.” Aiko replied cheerfully. “I am glad you’re enjoying it,” Foss said, his smile widening.

However, an instant later his expression clouded over. Such an apologetic expression didn’t fit on his gentle face. Wondering what was the matter, Aiko stopped eating and gave him her full attention.

“The truth is, I am terribly sorry to say that... today is the last day we will be able to serve seasoned food.”

“Huh!? We won’t be able to have any more Nilchissle!?”

Yuka cried out in shock. She really loved curry.

“Yes. I’m terribly sorry for the inconvenience. However, our stock of certain ingredients has run dry... Normally, we make sure to keep plenty of stock in reserve to avoid such a problem... However, this past month the mountains have grown increasingly dangerous and fewer and fewer adventurers are going out to gather

what we need. In fact, just the other day a high ranked adventurer party went off in the mountains to investigate the cause, and went missing. Since then, almost nobody has been willing to go collect spices. All the establishments that deal in food, ourselves included are uncertain when we'll be able to restock."

"Umm... what exactly has made the mountains so much more dangerous?"

"The reports say that swarms of monsters have started appearing. However, the outer fringes of the range have always been safe in the past. There's supposed to be ferocious monsters living on the other side of this mountain, but they almost never cross the peak to our side. However multiple people have claimed to have seen powerful monsters roaming our side of the mountains in recent times."

"That's certainly worrying..."

Aiko furrowed her brows. Yuka and the other students exchanged dark glances. "I'm sorry, this wasn't something I should have brought up while you were enjoying your meal," Foss said apologetically. In an attempt to lighten the mood, he tried to steer the conversation in a more optimistic direction.

"However, I believe this disturbance will die down soon enough."

"How can you be so sure?"

"The truth is, some new guests came in this evening looking for a room. It seems they're adventurers here to search for the people who went missing. Apparently the chief of Fuhren's adventurer guild sent them, so I imagine they must be quite strong. I'm sure they'll be able to get to the cause of all this trouble."

Aiko and the students didn't really understand the gravity of that statement, but David and the other knights murmured appreciatively.

The Fuhren branch chief was one of the most renowned people in the adventurer's guild. Anyone that had been nominated by him personally had to be more than just quite strong. As fellow warriors, the knights' interest was piqued. They began mentally checking down the list of famous gold rank adventurers.

Aiko looked at the knights with a puzzled expression. Before anyone could explain, however, they heard voices coming from the staircase. One male and two female. One of the girls seemed to be complaining to the guy. In place of an explanation, Foss said,

“Speak of the devil. That’s them. Sir knights, if you would like to speak with them, now is your only chance. They said they were leaving tomorrow.”

“I see. However, they sound quite young. Are there any gold ranked adventurers this young?”

David and the other knights scratched their heads in confusion. None of the gold ranked adventurers they knew of were that young.

The trio’s voices grew louder as they approached.

The students’ table was at the very back, surrounded on three sides by walls. It offered a perfect view of the entire floor. However, the alcove also had a set of curtains that could be pulled closed if the occupants wished for some privacy. Their party stood out as is, and now that people had taken to calling Aiko a fertility goddess, they usually took their meals behind closed curtains. Today was naturally no exception.

Finally the trio grew close enough for Aiko and the others to make out their conversation.

“Sheesh, how many times do I have to tell you? I get really lonely when you start flirting with Yue, you know. Can’t you please stop doing it in front of me? Hey, are you listening to me, Hajime-san?”

“Yeah, yeah, I heard you. If you just don’t want to see it, we can get you your own room.”

“Hmph! Did you hear that, Yue-san? Hajime-san’s so mean.”

“Yeah. Hajime... you meanie!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

When they heard the name the two girls were using, Aiko and Yuka did a double take.

Did they say what I think they just said? And is it just me or does that guy’s voice sound just like “his” voice? Questions raced through the students’ minds. They all tensed up and stared at the curtain, as if the force of their gaze alone could pierce the opaque veil.

Yuka especially was shocked. Her life had been saved by Hajime, and of the people present, she’d been the most affected by that incident. She didn’t even notice when her spoon slipped from her fingers and clattered to the floor.

The other students too were reminded of the boy that had fallen into the abyss four months ago. The boy whose demise had reminded them of their own frail mortality. The boy who was at the root of the trauma they wished they could forget. The boy who, for

better or worse, always stood out. Alarmed, Foss and the knights asked what was wrong, but none of the students even heard their words. While the knights were looking at each other in bewilderment, Aiko muttered a single word.

“Nagumo-kun?” That word was enough to break her out of her daze, and she found she could freely move her body again. Aiko stood up so fast her chair fell to the floor behind her, and almost tripped over herself in her haste to rip open the curtain.

It slid apart smoothly, revealing Hajime, Yue and Shea standing a few feet away.

Before she could even get a good look at him, Aiko shouted his name.

“Nagumo-kun!”

“Huh...? Sensei?”

Standing in front of Aiko was a surprised boy with white hair and an eyepatch covering one eye.

He looked very different from the Hajime that Aiko remembered. Not just his appearance, but even his demeanor felt different.

The boy Aiko knew was a gentle, mature individual who always seemed to be spacing out in class. She had always thought that awkward smile he wore when people talked to him suited him well.

However, the boy in front of him had a gaze as sharp as a hawk's, making it difficult to approach him. He was so different from how Aiko remembered him that had they just passed each other on the street, she definitely would not have recognized him.

Still, close inspection revealed that his facial features and voice closely resembled the same Hajime she remembered. And more than anything... he had called her Sensei.

That was what made it certain. Even if his appearance and the way he carried himself had changed, the boy standing in front of her was none other than her student, Hajime Nagumo.

"Nagumo-kun... it's really you, isn't it? You're alive... You're still alive..."

"Uh no, you must have mistaken me for someone else. Bye."

"Huh?"

It was a miraculous reunion with the student she'd thought long dead. Tears sprung to Aiko's eyes. "What were you doing all this time? What happened to you? I'm so glad you're alright!" There were a mountain of things she wanted to say, but she couldn't get the words out. And yet, all Hajime replied with was a curt dismissal.

Aiko let out a confused mutter. Even her tears seemed to retreat back into their ducts. But when Hajime started walking toward the inn's exit, she suddenly returned to her senses and chased after him. She grabbed him by the sleeve and tried talking to him.

"Wait just one minute! It's definitely you, isn't it, Nagumo-kun? You called me Sensei just now! There's no way you could be anyone else."

"No really, you just misheard me. I just... said stunted, in a really thick accent. Yeah."

"Excuse me, who are you calling short!? I'll have you know that's very rude! And that's the worst excuse I've ever heard. Why did you try to trick me? And that arm and that eye... What exactly

happened to you? What have you been doing until now? And why didn't you come back to us? Answer me, Nagumo-kun! You can't fool your teacher!" Aiko's shouting echoed throughout the inn.

Most of the other diners were watching curiously, wondering what their fertility goddess was doing with this guy.

The rest of the students and knights filed out of their little alcove as well.

The students' jaws all dropped when they saw Hajime. They were shocked not just at the fact that he was still alive, but at how radically different he looked too. Unsure of what to do or say, they just stared.

Though Hajime seemed to be reacting to all this calmly, he was panicking internally. Even in his wildest dreams, he hadn't expected to run into his old teacher and classmates while out on a quest for the branch chief.

His shock was what had led him to accidentally let slip that first "Sensei," all but sealing his fate.

Battered by Aiko's onslaught of questions, Hajime looked to the magic eight ball in his mind for suggestions, but all he got were worthless choices like "run away," "keep pretending she's got the wrong guy," "act like a weird foreigner, or "kidnap Ai-chan." The last one was especially terrible.

Fortunately, his partner came to his rescue. Not the worthless rabbit-eared one, the cool vampire princess. Yue walked up to Hajime, wrapped her arm around him, and forcibly pulled Aiko's arm off. David and the other knights glared daggers at her.

"Get off, you're bothering Hajime."

"Wh-Who're you? I'm in the middle of a very important discussion with my student..."

"Then calm down first."

Aiko faltered a little in the face of Yue's cold stare. There wasn't too much of a difference in their height. It would have looked like two little girls fighting, but Aiko always acted like she was much younger than she was, while Yue's age gave her an air of maturity. And so, it actually looked more like an adult scolding a kid.

Though it was actually Yue who felt bad for blurting out such rude words, and she quickly stepped back, retreating behind Hajime. Trying to maintain some semblance of dignity, Aiko straightened her back and squared her shoulders... but the effect was less than impressive.

“Sorry, you’re right. I let myself get a bit worked up. Anyway, it really is you, right, Nagumo-kun?” Aiko spoke quietly, but with conviction. Her gaze was focused solely on Hajime.

Seeing her expression, Hajime realized she’d chase after him no matter what he said, so he just scratched his head, sighed, and told her the truth.

“Yeah, it’s me. Long time no see, Sensei.”

“It’s really, really you... You were alive.”

Hajime just shrugged his shoulders.

“Yeah. Some stuff happened, but I made it out alive.”

“Thank god. Thank god you’re alive.”

Hajime didn’t respond. Instead, he walked over to a nearby table and sat down. Yue and Shea followed suit, though Shea was still a little confused.

Aiko and the others looked at him blankly. It looked like Hajime had regained his composure for real now. He beckoned to Foss, who was standing behind Yuka and David, watching the proceedings with great interest.

“Umm, Hajime-san. Is this really alright? These are your friends, right? This is just a guess... but these are people from your old world, right?”

“So what? I was a little surprised to see them here, but that’s about it. We came here to eat dinner, so let’s order our food. I was looking forward to trying the food here. Did you know? They have curry... Wait, you wouldn’t know what that is. They have this thing called Nilchissle here, it’s supposed to be really spicy. I hope it tastes like I think it will.”

“Then I’ll get that too. I want to know what kind of food you like, Hajime.”

“Ah, trying to flirt with him even now... You’re good, Yue-san. Well, I guess I’ll get that too, then. Sir, we’d like to order.”

At first Shea had glanced nervously over at Aiko and the others, but she stopped paying them any mind after Hajime had said it was fine. Foss walked over, wearing an awkward smile, and Shea began ordering.

Of course Aiko wasn’t done yet. The nonchalance with which Hajime had sat down had struck her dumb for a moment, but once she returned to her senses she briskly walked up to Hajime’s table and angrily slammed her hands down.

“Nagumo-kun, I’m not done speaking with you. Don’t ignore

me! And who are these two girls, anyway?" Aiko's words echoed the sentiments of everyone present. The knights, who'd finally put together the fact that Hajime was the missing student thought to have died, also nodded in agreement.

The reality of Hajime's survival finally hit Yuka and the other students as well. Still shaken, they quietly waited for Hajime's reply.

Hajime furrowed his brow in annoyance. Knowing Aiko, she wouldn't give up until he gave her an answer. He wanted to be able to eat in peace, so reluctantly looked back up at her.

"We accepted a request to come here from Fuhren. We've been traveling nonstop, so at least let us eat before I tell you what happened. Oh, and these two are..."

Hajime glanced over at Yue and Shea, who introduced themselves before he could.

"Yue."

"My name's Shea."

"I'm Hajime's lover." "I'm Hajime-san's lover."

"L-Lover?"

Aiko glanced back and forth between Hajime and the two girls. She was having trouble processing what they'd just said.

Behind her, Nana and Taeko let out gasps of surprise. Atsushi and the other guys just stared, slack-jawed. Yuka stiffened up, as if she'd been hit by a bolt of lightning.

"Hey, Yue can say that, but you most definitely are not, Shea."

"I can't believe you Hajime-san! That's so mean! You even stole my first kiss!"

"How many times do I have to tell you? That was just C—"

"Nagumo-kun?"

"What is it, Sensei?"

At Shea's mention of Hajime stealing her first kiss, Aiko finally recovered enough say something. Her voice was low, and her expression made it clear that she'd misunderstood something. She seemed to be thinking Hajime had these two girls waiting on him hand and foot.

Her face was bright red, but her eyes were glimmering with determination. Determination to bring her wayward student back on the path of righteousness.

And so, Sensei's Wrath struck Hajime in this peaceful town of Ur.

“N-Not only did you steal a girl’s first kiss, you’re also two-timing!? Is the reason you didn’t come back to us because you were too busy flirting with these girls!? In that case... I’ll never forgive you! As a teacher, I cannot forgive you! You need a good scolding! I’ll fix that twisted personality of yours right now, Nagumo-kun!” Hajime just sighed deeply, an exasperated expression on his face.

Thanks to Aiko’s outburst, the other customers started staring too, so Hajime and the others moved to the privacy of the VIP table.

Aiko, Yuka, and the other students all peppered him with questions, but Hajime’s mind was on the Nilchissle he was hoping to eat for dinner, so he kept his answers as brief as possible.

Q: After you fell from the bridge, what happened?

A: I went through hell.

Q: How come your hair is white now?

A: Because I went through hell.

Q: What happened to your eye?

A: I went through even more hell.

Q: Why didn’t you come back to us?

A: Because I don’t have any reason to.

“Hey, answer properly!” Fed up with his responses, Aiko puffed out her cheeks and yelled angrily. Though she didn’t look intimidating in the slightest.

As always, Hajime just took it all in stride. He didn’t even meet Aiko’s gaze, and instead continued tearing through his Nilchissle, sometimes commenting on this or that to Yue and Shea. He looked extremely satisfied.

Unable to take his offhanded treatment of Aiko any longer, David started yelling at Hajime too. The power of love was quite something. He even slammed his fist down on the table for added effect.

“Hey, brat! Aiko’s asking a question! Answer her properly!” Hajime glanced over at David, then breathed another sigh.

“I’m trying to eat here. Can’t you be a bit more polite?” David reddened with anger. Not only was he a templar knight, he was one skilled enough to be tasked with the mission of guarding Aiko. And yet, Hajime had brushed him off without even a second thought.

Realizing Hajime wasn’t willing to humor him in the slightest, David changed his angle of attack. He looked over at Shea and let out a string of insults.

“Hmph, you dare lecture me on manners? Let me throw those words right back at you. How dare you bring a filthy brute like that to a table meant for humans? Have you no shame? How about I lop off those disgusting ears of hers for you? Then she’d at least look more like a human.”

Shea fidgeted uneasily under his disdainful glare.

Back in Brooke, because of Catherine, the first impression she’d given people when she’d entered the Masaka Inn, and Hajime’s own presence, most people had treated her with respect. A few people had glared disapprovingly at Fuhren, but no one had tried to heckle her directly, as it was a crime to harm another’s slave.

In other words, this was the first time she’d felt the full brunt of people’s hatred and discrimination toward beastmen directly. She thought she’d no longer cared about what strangers thought of her, but David’s blatant malice hurt her more than she’d expected. Hence why she lowered her gaze.

It wasn’t just David either. Upon closer inspection, it was evident the other knights were glaring hatefully at her too. No matter how nice they acted toward Aiko or the other students, they were still templar knights. Their ties to the Holy Church and Heiligh meant they held the beastmen in contempt. In fact, their hatred was even stronger than regular humans, since it was the Holy Church’s teachings that claimed beastmen were inferior beings.

Their way of thinking had become less rigid by interacting with Aiko and the others, but such a deeply ingrained sense of values couldn’t be so easily overturned.

Aiko opened her mouth to protest the knights’ harsh words, but before she could say anything, Yue took Shea by the hand and shot them a stare colder than death itself.

The withering intensity of her gaze caused David to flinch back for a moment, but the fact that he’d cowered before a little girl, even if only for an instant, only made him angrier.

David wasn’t normally someone who’d snap this easily, but Aiko’s reproachful gaze made him touchier than usual.

“How dare you look at me like that! You’re not even a messenger of God, what right do you have to blame me!”

Chase quickly stood up to restrain his commanding officer, but before he could, Yue’s voice echoed clearly through the chaotic din.

“What a pathetic man.” Every word dripped with scorn. Yue couldn’t believe someone could be so intolerant about something as

irrelevant as race.

Having already lost his composure, Yue's disdain only served to drive him further into a frenzy.

"You damn heretic. I'll send you to hell along with that beast you love so much." He put a hand over his sword.

Yuka and Atsushi reached for their own weapons, while Aiko and Chase tried to calm David down with words.

However, David was beyond words now. He made to draw his sword, but before he could...

Bang! The nose reverberated throughout the Water Sprite Inn, and his head jerked back.

His whole body was sent flying from the force, and he crashed into the wall behind him headfirst. The whites of his eyes were visible as he slid to the ground in a crumpled heap. His sword clattered to the floor next to him a second later.

No one could understand what had just happened. Everyone just stared blankly at the ground where David lay.

Startled by the sound, Foss hurriedly opened the curtain to see what had happened. His eyes went round as he took in the spectacle.

However, Foss' sudden entrance served to bring everyone else back to their senses. Everyone's gazes shifted to where the noise had originated from.

The students saw an object they recognized, but one that shouldn't have existed in this world. Meanwhile, the knights had no clue what they were looking at. It was Hajime's revolver.

White smoke rose from Donner's barrel. Hajime had been kind enough to shoot one of his non-lethal rubber bullets.

While they still didn't fully grasp what had happened, they realized Hajime was the one who had attacked, and all cautiously put a hand over their own swords.

They started radiating bloodlust, but a moment later an aura so oppressive that it was palpable snuffed out their aggression. It was powerful enough that the knights were forced back into their seats.

Even though Hajime's Intimidation wasn't directed at them, Aiko and the students were trembling in fear.

Hajime slapped Donner down onto the table with an audible thunk. Just to drive the point home, he then went on to explain with finality what his stance was regarding his former classmates.

"I don't really care about you guys. I have no intention of

getting involved with your affairs, and I don't particularly want you to meddle in mine. Also, I've got no plans to tell you everything I've been up to, or what I'm going to do from here on out. I only came here because the guild asked me to, and once my job here's done I'm resuming my journey. So that'll be where we part ways. Let's just stay out of each other's way after that. You're welcome to do whatever you want, but just don't get in my way. If you try and fight me like that guy did... I might kill you."

Got that? His intimidating gaze seemed to say. No one said a word. He looked over at the knights, and it took every ounce of their strength to nod underneath Hajime's Intimidation.

He then turned his gaze onto Aiko and the students. Aiko said nothing. Rather, she couldn't say anything. It wasn't the Intimidation. If she agreed to Hajime's request, her student would vanish before she even had a chance to learn what had happened to him. Her pride as a teacher refused to allow that.

Hajime sighed, and released his Intimidation. Though Aiko hadn't said anything, Hajime had guessed what she must be thinking. He decided it wasn't worth trying to force an answer out of her.

Nana, Taeko, Atsushi, and most of the other students were all trembling in fear, so he surmised they wouldn't be likely to bother him again. Only Yuka didn't seem afraid. She gazed at him with a mixture of confusion and a hint of sadness, but Hajime ignored her.

With the pressure gone, Chase and the other knights collapsed onto the table, panting. Aiko and the students weren't in as bad shape, but they also sank into their chairs gratefully. Hajime paid them no mind and instead turned to Shea, who still looked a little down.

"Hey, Shea. This is just how people are in the outside world. If you keep letting every little thing get to you, you'll just be depressed forever."

"Yeah, I know... I know that, but still... I didn't want to believe it, but I guess humans really do think my bunny ears are disgusting." Shea smiled bitterly while stroking her drooping ears. Yue looked gently into her eyes and tried to console her.

"Shea, your bunny ears are fluffy and cute."

"Yue-san... do you really mean that?"

Seeing she still wasn't convinced, Hajime followed up in an exasperated voice. Yue's constant admonishment of Hajime had

definitely helped in softening his attitude toward Shea.

"Look, those guys have been brainwashed by the Holy Church, so they're even more racist than most people. Don't most people like keeping rabbitmen as pets? If they enjoy keeping your kind around, they obviously can't hate your rabbit ears that much."

"I... guess so. U-Umm, by the way, Hajime-san... what... do you think... about my bunny ears?" Blushing slightly, Shea looked up at Hajime, a glimmer of hope in her eyes. Her ears were twitching wildly, as if she wanted to know the answer, but was also afraid to hear it.

"They're okay, I guess..." Hajime spared them a single glance before hurriedly returning to his food. Shea's ears drooped again.

However, Yue's next words brought them back to their usual cheerful state.

"Hajime really likes them. Sometimes, he'll even rub them when you're sleeping."

"Yue!? You promised not to tell!"

"H-Hajime-san... you really do like my ears. Ehehe." Shea cupped her cheeks with her hands and squirmed in embarrassment. Meanwhile, the ears on top of her head were doing some kind of happy dance.

The tense atmosphere that had pervaded the table seconds ago was nowhere to be seen, and everyone marveled at how quickly the mood had changed.

After watching their romcom skit for a few minutes, Atsushi quietly mumbled,

"Huh, that's strange. I was scared to death of Nagumo a few seconds ago, but now I feel like murdering him..."

"You too, huh? You know, those two are really cute... and they're both totally my type... It's absolute torture watching them flirt with another guy..."

Atsushi nodded in agreement. The two friends clenched their fists, steeled their resolve, and exchanged glances.

"Nagumo said he doesn't care about us anymore, right? But you know, I still want to ask him how to get the girls of this world to fall for you... I have to know! Noboru! Akito!"

"We'll brave the depths of hell together with you, brother!"

The three males of Ai-chan's defense force exchanged a glance of solidarity before glaring at Hajime, eyes burning with jealousy. The serious mood from earlier now completely dispelled, everyone

returned to normal. Yuka, Taeko, and Nana all glared coldly at the boys.

Chase had taken his subordinates and was currently trying to treat David's injuries. Once he was sure David wasn't in any serious trouble, he turned to Hajime and gave him his most charming smile. There was something he wanted to ask Hajime at all costs.

"Nagumo-dono— Is it alright if I call you that? I apologize for what my captain said. We are Aiko-san's guards, so when it comes to her safety, we sometimes get a little touchy. Please, could you find it in your heart to forgive him?"

So you just start trying to kill people when you get touchy? Well, I guess I'm not really one to judge people on their murderous impulses. Hajime waved his hand dispassionately.

Chase's eyebrow twitched at Hajime's nonchalant dismissal, but he kept his business smile on. His attention was focused solely on the artifact Hajime had placed on the table, and he quickly pressed on with his question.

"Also, about that... artifact. I cannot fully grasp its function, but it appears to be quite powerful. It seems to be some form of long range weapon, but it is both faster and stronger than a bow. And yet, I could sense no magic nor did I see a magic circle anywhere. Just how does it work?"

He was still smiling, but Chase's gaze was deadly serious. Since it didn't appear to use any mana, he was interested in the possibility of mass producing a weapon stronger than a bow that anyone could use. A weapon of that caliber could change the very nature of warfare. Chase suspected that even if the entire knight corps took Hajime on, they wouldn't stand a chance against such an artifact, so he had to ask.

Hajime glanced at Chase. Before he could say anything, an excited voice interrupted him. Atsushi.

"Th-That's right, Nagumo. That's a gun, isn't it!? How on earth did you get something like that!?"

Chase did a double-take.

"Gun? Tamai, you know what that object is?"

"Huh? Yeah, of course I do. It's a weapon from our world."

Chase's eyes sparkled as the beginnings of an idea formed in his mind. He looked back at Hajime.

"I see. In other words, this isn't an artifact you found... but one that was created... And the creator must have been..."

“Me.” Hajime replied casually. Chase had marked Hajime as the secretive type, so he was surprised when he answered so readily.

“I see it’s no secret. Nagumo-dono, do you understand what that weapon is capable of? It could...”

“Change the nature of how war is fought in this world... right? Assuming you could mass produce it, anyway. I’m sure you’re going to beg me to come back, or at least teach you how to make it, right? I refuse. Give it up.” He said with finality. It felt like he had prepared this speech beforehand. However, Chase refused to give up. That was how much the gun was worth.

“But this could help make even our weakest soldiers overwhelmingly powerful. We could take advantage of our numbers in the coming war and drastically increase our chances of victory. Your help could save the lives of your friends and your teacher. Shouldn’t you—”

“Say what you want, I won’t help you guys. And if you try and steal it from me, I’ll interpret that as an act of war. So if you want to go that route... you better be prepared to die before the real war starts.”

Hajime’s words sent chills down Chase’s spine, and he fell silent. Aiko chose that moment to butt in and try to smooth the situation over.

“Chase-san, I’m sure Nagumo-kun has his reasons, so please don’t try and force him. Nagumo-kun, you need to choose your words more carefully too. Handling things peacefully is important... Nagumo-kun, do you really not plan on coming back?”

“That’s right. I’m leaving tomorrow to investigate, and once I finish my request, I’ll leave.”

“But why...” She gazed sadly at him, but Hajime just stood up and prepared to leave. Yue and Shea had finished eating as well. Aiko tried to stop him, but he ignored her and headed up the stairs.

A strange atmosphere descended upon those left behind.

“He really was alive.” A quiet voice broke through the silence, confirming the reality of what they’d just seen. The one who had spoken was Yuka. There was a conflicted expression on her face as she looked at the staircase.

“Kaori-chan was right. Though, I guess he didn’t need her help. In fact, he managed to get out all on his own.”

“Yukacchi... are you alright?”

“Yuka...”

Taeko and Nana were worried because Yuka had sounded like she was talking to herself. Yuka smiled bitterly at the two of them, then shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm fine... just really surprised. But it's not a bad thing, you know? Our classmate's still alive. That can only be a good thing, right?"

"Yeah, you're right! Though I still can't really believe it. I mean, you saw him! He felt like a totally different person!"

"Indeed. How do I put this... he feels... more wild? You know?" Taeko spoke haltingly. It hadn't been exactly like encountering a crazed serial killer, but there had been something feral to this new Hajime.

Atsushi and the other guys chose this moment to interject with their own opinions.

"And he looks waaay stronger now. Like, holy crap."

"Tell me about it. His hair color's changed, he acts different... he has a gun... and he's so intimidating now..."

"There's all that too, but... You know, he said he doesn't care about us anymore... He probably doesn't think too highly of us, huh?"

The students were all glad that a classmate they'd thought long dead was actually alive. Even Taeko and Nana, who'd been terrified of him, still honestly thought so. Atsushi too. It felt like this huge weight had been lifted off their chest. If they had to sum it up in a word, they were "relieved."

However, there was still the inexplicable sense of discomfort that came with the fact that he hadn't seemed to care about them at all. Not only that, he had become far stronger and far sharper than before, and that had intimidated them.

Worse, they had always mocked him as the weakest member of their party, and none of them had stepped in to stop Hiyama's bullying. Finally, there had been that misfire incident that had led to his fall, so perhaps to him it was difficult to imagine his classmates liked him at all.

That had been part of why none of them had tried to stop Hajime from leaving.

The students all lapsed into silence again, thinking about their fear, as well as their inability to do anything to stop him. Once again, it was Yuka who broke the silence.

"I forgot to thank him."

The students all exchanged glances. They had been so focused on his indifference and how much he had changed, that they'd forgotten what was truly important... True, they hadn't directly had their lives saved like Yuka, but the students were only here right now because Hajime had risked his life to save them.

Yuka's conflicted expression had stemmed from that. Unlike the others, she had been worried about the fact that she'd failed to thank him again, that she hadn't really had an opportunity to during their conversation, and that even if she had it would be pointless to say anything now.

"Sonobe-san..." Aiko didn't know what else to say to her.

She had been too shaken by the rapid pace with which events had unfolded, and Hajime's drastic change to be able to stop him from leaving. Aiko wasn't sure what she could say that would reach Hajime now.

Their food had long since gone cold, but no one had any appetite now anyway. Everyone stared at the plates of cold food, thinking about Hajime's survival all the while.

That night.

It was midnight, and everyone was so mentally and physically exhausted from the events of the day that they were fast asleep. Only Aiko was still awake.

Her room was a small single. It was furnished with a wooden table, a chair, a bed, a small fireplace, and a leather sofa. In winter the fireplace would be crackling merrily, warming its guest.

But right now it was empty. Aiko sat on the sofa, staring into the cold ashes as she thought about the day's events. The inside of her head was a whirling, disorganized mess.

There were things she had to think about, things she wanted to think about, and planning for the future that needed to be done. Her brain was so overloaded that she couldn't think straight. She was happy her student was still alive, and angry at his indifference toward them.

She had caught a small glimpse of his power when he'd dispatched David. It was quite possible that he had needed to change that drastically to survive, but that only made it harder for Aiko when she thought about how he must have suffered, and how she had been unable to save him. She let out a long sigh. On the other hand, she remembered how he'd talked to those two girls, and

was happy that he'd found comrades he could trust.

Suddenly, a voice called out to her, despite the fact that she should have been alone in the room.

"You sure make some interesting expressions, Sensei."

"Huh!?" Aiko jerked her head around. Hajime was standing in the doorway, his arms folded across his chest. Shocked, Aiko stammered,

"N-Nagumo-kun? Wh-What are you... How did you..."

"If you're asking how I got in, it's through the door."

"But I locked..."

"I'm a Synergist, remember? This isn't like one of the locks back on earth, it's pretty easy to pick."

For a few seconds Aiko just sat there, dumbstruck. Finally, she managed to calm herself down and glare angrily at Hajime.

"It's rude to come into a girl's room so late at night, especially without knocking. You even picked the lock... Why?" The words "night visit" flashed through Aiko's mind, but she dismissed them instantly.

How could you even think something like that about one of your own students? Hajime absorbed her rebuke and cut directly to the heart of the matter.

"Sorry, I guess. I didn't want anyone else to know about my visit. There's a few things I need to tell you, Sensei, but I couldn't with those knights hanging around. They'd probably get violent if I mentioned it."

"Something you need to tell me? But didn't you say you don't care about us, Nagumo-kun?"

Aiko's eyes glimmered with hope. Perhaps he really would come back to them after all. Regardless, listening to her student's worries was the job of a teacher.

Sadly, Hajime's next words dashed her hopes.

"Yeah, I still don't, so please don't look so expectant... Anyway, I wanted to tell you because I think you'd be able to handle it the most calmly, Sensei. You're free to do what you want with the information after I tell you."

With that preface, Hajime launched into the story he'd heard from Oscar about the Liberators and the crazed gods that were toying with the world.

There was a reason Hajime had thought to tell Aiko all of this.

He doubted those insane gods would let Kouki and the others

return to their original world even if they did everything they asked. “Save the humans from the demons,” was what they had decreed, but this entire war was just a part of those very gods’ mad game. And they surely wouldn’t want to let go of a piece as interesting as a hero. In fact, they’d probably want to make the hero an integral part of their next game too.

Of course, Hajime had no intention of tracking Kouki down just to tell him that. He really didn’t care about what happened to the others anymore, and to be quite frank, taking a detour to go to him would just be a pain. Besides, even if he did tell Kouki, Hajime doubted that ball of misguided justice would believe him anyway.

It was obvious who the other students would believe too. Between an old classmate who had drastically changed and the hero everyone relied upon, it wasn’t even a contest. Chances were he’d just be branded a heretic for slandering the “Great Lord Ehit.” For all those reason, Hajime did not want to seek out Kouki.

However, by sheer coincidence, he had run into Aiko again. Hajime understood her quite well. Aiko was always thinking of her students, so she wouldn’t be easily swayed by the pope’s honeyed words like the students had been, and do what was best for them. And because of her overwhelming popularity, he was sure that her words would have more of an impact on them than his would.

Just how much of an influence that would be, he didn’t know.

Though if Kouki and the others started straying from the gods’ plan because of this, they would surely draw the gods’ attention.

Eventually, tales of Hajime’s labyrinth conquest would spread, and he was certain the gods would eventually do something to intervene. So, by having Kouki stray from their plan, Hajime hoped to delay the gods’ interference in his own business, or at the very least split their attention.

And the very faint hope that they too might start searching for an alternative way back home after learning they couldn’t rely on the gods. Lastly, he knew that the Liberators had been defeated because the gods had manipulated the people and turned them against them, so in order to avoid having that happen with his former classmates, he wanted to plant the seeds of doubt early.

Though this was all something Hajime had just come up with after seeing Aiko again, so he wasn’t exactly expecting much.

Hajime didn’t hold any particular grudge toward his old classmates, but he also didn’t really care about them. If they could

be of use to him, he'd use them, and if not he'd leave them alone. He'd found a way they might help, which was the only reason he bothered to pass this information along.

Aiko was stunned speechless after she heard Hajime's tale. She wasn't even sure how to process it. Frankly, it would probably be some time until she'd managed to digest it all.

"Anyway, I just wanted to let you know. That's what I learned at the bottom of the abyss. What you do with that information is up to you, Sensei. You're welcome to believe it or not as you wish. I don't care."

"N-Nagumo-kun, does your journey have something to do with those... crazed gods?"

"Hah, no way. I don't give a shit about what happens to this world. I just want to find a way home. That's the only reason I'm on this journey. I only told you because I figured you knowing might help sometime down the road."

Hajime snorted at her absurd question. Aiko was relieved that he wasn't sticking his head into anything dangerous, but she grew angry again when he talked about how willing he was to disregard the lives of strangers. That being said, she too valued the students' safety over the salvation of this world, so she didn't have the right to say anything. Instead, she changed topics.

"Do you have an idea of how you're going to get back?"

"Sorta. The labyrinths hold all the answers. If you guys are interested, you're welcome to explore them yourselves. After you clear the first hundred floors of the Orcus Labyrinth, you'll finally make it to the real deal. Though judging by what happened today, you'd all die instantly the moment you wandered in. If you can't even handle that level of Intimidation, you won't last five seconds."

Aiko thought back to the immense pressure Hajime had radiated at dinner. She looked up at him with a mixture of sympathy and admiration, realizing how harsh a path he must have walked to survive in such a hellish place.

They both fell silent, and that silence stretched on for a few minutes. Finally, Hajime turned back to the door. He'd told Aiko everything he'd come here to say. The words Orcus Labyrinth had stirred something in Aiko's memory though, and before he could leave she called out.

"Shirasaki-san still hasn't given up on you, you know!"

"....." Hajime stopped, his hand hovering over the door handle.

Aiko continued talking.

"Everyone else thought you were dead, but only she didn't give up. She believed you were still alive. Even now, she's fighting through the Great Orcus Labyrinth, looking for you. Amanogawa-kun and the others are only down there to get stronger, but she's with them because she's determined to find you."

"...Is Shirasaki safe?" Hajime asked, after a long pause. Seeing him show concern for someone else gave Aiko hope that the old Hajime might still be alive somewhere deep inside.

"Y-Yes. The labyrinth is a dangerous place, but it seems the party inside is steadily progressing as they grow stronger. At least, that's what the letters they send us say. Are you worried about her? Shirasaki-san was your friend, right, Nagumo-kun?"

Aiko's tone was cheerful. Instead of responding to her question, Hajime turned around and said,

"I wouldn't exactly say that, but... if you guys exchange letters, you should let her know that her real enemy isn't the monsters in the labyrinth. It's one of her so-called comrades."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I could tell from Tamai's attitude. Sensei, everyone's saying I fell during my fight with the Behemoth because of an accident, right?"

"W-Well... yes. Someone's spell misfired and... So you *do* bear a grudge against everyone, Nagumo-kun?"

"Nah, I don't give a damn about that, really. Anyway, they're wrong. It wasn't a misfire. Someone was quite clearly aiming for me."

"Huh? They were aiming for you?"

Aiko repeated, confused. However, Hajime continued mercilessly, adding another huge worry to Aiko's list of worries.

"One of my classmates tried to kill me."

"Wha—!?" Aiko paled at his words.

"The only thing I can think of that might have caused it was my relationship with Shirasaki, so whoever did it was probably someone jealous of me. If she's still safe, you have to tell her to watch out. That person is probably going to try and make her his by force." That was all Hajime said before leaving the room.

A sudden chill crept into the room, and Aiko wrapped her arms around herself. One of her precious students had tried to kill a classmate. Worse, he'd been a coward that had stabbed Hajime in

the back. For Aiko, who wished to believe in all of her students, it was a hard pill to swallow, but she had no reason to believe Hajime had lied to her. Her desire to believe in her students, and her belief that her students were all good people were warring with each other.

Aiko knew she wouldn't get any sleep that night.

Chapter II: A New Meeting

Dawn.

The glimmer of the moon was fading rapidly, its light being siphoned by the sun rising to the east. Hajime, Yue, and Shea were already ready to depart. The three of them were standing outside the Water Sprite Inn, their packs filled with riceballs for the road.

Despite the extremely early hour, Foss had prepared breakfast for them without complaint.

Truly a first-rate inn. Always one to give credit where credit was due, Hajime thanked Foss profusely for the riceballs and the service.

They quickly left for the north gate, the morning mist still clinging to the ground. The path beyond the gate stretched on toward the mountains. The foot of the mountains was a hard day's ride on horseback, so on Steiff it would take them only a few hours.

Today would mark the fifth day since Will Cudeta's party disappeared in the mountains. Chances were they were long dead. Hajime doubted he'd find anyone alive, but there was always the possibility they'd survived against all odds. If he did bring them back alive, that make Ilwa like Hajime all the more, so he wanted to start looking as fast as possible. Fortunately, the weather was fair. The perfect day for a search.

The sounds of a town waking up could be heard as they headed down the main street. After a few minutes, they reached the north gate.

As they approached, Hajime sensed a few people standing by the exit and narrowed his eye. They weren't moving.

As the morning mist cleared... he saw Aiko, Yuka, and the other six students.

"I think I can guess what you're here for, but I'll ask just in case." Hajime glared at Aiko.

Aiko faltered under his withering gaze, but she stood her ground. A few feet away the students were stroking their horses and talking about something. They noticed Hajime and the others and walked over to Aiko.

“We’re coming with you. You’re looking for a missing person, right? It’s better to have more people looking, then.”

“No thanks. If you want to come, you’re welcome to, but we’re not going together.”

“Wh-Why not?”

“Because of the difference in our speed. I’m not going to match your slow place, Sensei.” Hajime stared pointedly at the horses standing behind Yuka. From the looks of them he doubted they could even handle having people ride them, but he didn’t say anything. Even if they’d been the fastest horses in the realm, they couldn’t hope to match a motorcycle’s speed.

At Hajime’s words, Yuka looked around, then tilted her head in confusion. As far as she could see, there wasn’t any other means of transportation in sight.

“You’re saying we’re too slow, but... hey, Nagumo. You’re not going to say something crazy like you can run faster than these horses or anything, right? Just because you don’t care about us anymore doesn’t give you the right to lie to us, you know? And if you really can run faster that’s even worse... Honestly, that crazy pressure you released yesterday was like that too, it’s like you’ve stopped being human.”

Hajime was taken aback by Yuka’s bluntness. Though he couldn’t deny that he probably *could* outrun a horse just by running. In a sense, he really had stopped being human. Yuka hadn’t actually intended to say that, but her annoyance had just boiled over and she’d let it slip. However, her observations had been rather astute.

Hajime met Yuka’s gaze. She was glaring at him, whether warily, antagonistically, or something else altogether he couldn’t tell, but he let out a very deliberate sigh. Realizing explaining would be too much of a pain, Hajime wordlessly pulled Steiff out of his Treasure Trove.

Everyone’s jaw dropped open as they saw a motorcycle appear in thin air.

“Get it yet? Even if they sound like lies to you, they’re not. Hell, I probably could run faster than those horses. I’m not trying to bullshit you guys. There literally is that much of a difference in our travel speed.” Everyone was still too shocked by Steiff’s sudden appearance and its otherworldly, at least as far as this world was concerned, nature to say anything.

Finally, the motorcycle enthusiast of the class, Noboru, spoke

up, a quiver of excitement in his voice.

“D-Did you make this yourself too Nagumo?”

“Yeah. Anyway, we’re going so get out of the way.” Hajime made to mount Steiff, but Aiko, as always, stopped him. She was determined to join them by any means possible.

There were two reasons for her stubbornness.

First, she wanted to be sure what Hajime had told her last night was the truth. That a classmate had tried to kill him was a serious allegation, and she had to be 100% sure Hajime hadn’t just been mistaken. And if he hadn’t, she had to know who he thought this would-be murderer was. She needed more information. If there was even the slightest chance of preventing further misfortune, Aiko wanted to do everything in her power to help. And since there was no guarantee she would ever see Hajime again after their search was over, this was her only chance to catch him.

The second reason she wanted to tag along was to search for their own missing student, Yukitoshi Shimizu. They’d been looking high and low for him, but no one in the outlying villages had seen anyone matching his description.

The only place they hadn’t been able to gather much information from was the mountain region, where people normally didn’t live anyway. Regardless of whether he’d been caught up in some kind of incident or left of his own volition, it was unlikely that he’d ended up in the mountains, so they’d avoided it until now. However, as the opportunity had presented itself, Aiko was hoping to join up with Hajime in order to search for clues about Shimizu’s whereabouts.

Though it was half-coincidence that Yuka and the others were here too.

In order to ambush Hajime on his way out, Aiko had gotten up even before the crack of dawn. Yuka, who’d slept very little because of the previous day’s events had just happened to spot Aiko leaving her room.

Dressed in traveling gear as she was, there was no way she could have fooled Yuka. After learning that Aiko was going to try and join Hajime on his quest, Yuka had said “Then I’ll come too! Just give me 40 seconds to get ready!”

She insisted that if Aiko was going, the Ai-chan defense force would too, and she woke up all the other students and got them to tag along.

They didn't wake the knights, though, as they figured they'd just get into another fight with Hajime, so they just left a letter telling them to wait at the inn. Whether or not they actually would was a different matter... Aiko sidled up to Hajime and whispered to him quietly.

It was obvious she didn't want others hearing what she had to say. This close up, Hajime could tell that she was hiding the dark circles under her eyes with makeup. *Did she not sleep at all last night?*

"Nagumo-kun. As a teacher, I have to know more about what you told me last night, so until you agree to sit down and have a proper talk I'll never let you out of my sight. And if you do manage to escape, I'll chase you to the ends of the earth. I'm sure you'd like to avoid that, right? It can be while we're traveling or searching even, but I need you to make time to talk. If you do that, then I'll be willing to say our farewells once your job here is done... for now." Seeing the determination in her eyes, Hajime regretted telling her that last bit of information the previous night. Despite how much she ended up running around aimlessly, Aiko was stubborn to a fault. Even if he slipped away here, he could easily see her organizing the entire knight corps of the kingdom to search for him.

He looked up at the sky, and saw it was quickly growing brighter. If he wanted to find Will alive, he didn't have time to waste on a long question and answer session.

I guess you reap what you sow. Hajime sighed deeply, then met Aiko's gaze.

"Fine. You can come with us. Though I doubt we'll have any time to really talk."

"That's fine. There's just some things I want to confirm with you directly."

"Haah, you just don't give up, do you, Sensei? No matter what you do or where you are, you're still our teacher."

"That's right!" Aiko proudly puffed out her chest. Seeing that negotiations had ended favorably, Yuka and the others breathed a sigh of relief.

"Hajime, we're taking her with us?"

"Yep. Because no matter what happens, she'll never stop being my teacher. She never compromises when it comes to her students. If we leave her here now, she'll just get more annoying later."

"Hmm, she sounds like a really nice teacher."

Yue and Shea were surprised at how easily Hajime gave in. And

when they heard his grudging praise of her, their respect for Aiko rose considerably.

For his part, Hajime admired her dedication to her students, too. Even if he no longer considered himself a regular human, or his former peers his classmates, he still believed Aiko was one of the few adults who deserved his respect.

“But that motorcycle can’t fit more than three people. What are you going to do?”

Yuka pointed out a fatal issue. The horses would be too slow and Hajime would never dream of making Yue or Shea stay behind so Aiko could ride in their place. Hajime casually put Steiff back into his Treasure Trove and instead pulled out the other vehicle he’d made, Brise.

It resembled the Hummers the American military once used. Not only did it have a thick armor plating, but there were numerous deadly weapons installed onto its frame. The entire thing was painted matte black, too. Minus the rear turret, it was modeled after those pick-up trucks, and looked like it could easily run over anything in its path.

The students had already figured out Hajime must be using some type of artifact to materialize and dematerialize these massive objects at will, but they were still impressed. Seeing him now it was hard to imagine anyone had once called him incompetent.

“Those of you who can’t fit inside go sit in the trunk or something,” Hajime said as he got into the driver’s seat.

Brise tore its way down the straight path, the mountains growing closer every minute. It was nowhere nearly as well maintained as an actual highway, but Brise had built-in suspensions. On top of that, its wheels were enchanted with the same ground leveling skill that Steiff had, so even the guys sitting in the metallic trunk attached to the back didn’t feel any real discomfort.

The reason he’d bothered adding a trunk when he had the Treasure Trove was because he really wanted an opportunity to sit in the back and fire a gatling gun while on a high speed chase like in movies. His hobbies showed through a little in his creations.

The seats inside the car were all bench seats. Hajime was in the driver seat, with Aiko next to him, and Yue next to her. The reason she was next to him was so they could talk. She hadn’t wanted any

of the other students to hear just yet, so she'd insisted that she sit next to him.

Normally, the seat next to Hajime was reserved for Yue, but he'd explained the situation to her and she'd reluctantly agreed to let Aiko sit there for now. Aiko and Yue were both quite tiny, so there was a lot of leftover space.

Meanwhile, the back where Shea was sitting was a bit cramped. Shea, Yuka, and Taeko all possessed relatively... stacked assets, so they took up a decent amount of room. Among them it was only Nana who was flat. She glared enviously at the other three girls before looking down at her own modest chest. She gave them a forlorn pat, but they were nowhere near as bouncy as the others.

However, it was Shea who felt the most uncomfortable. She was sandwiched between Nana, who kept shooting jealous glances at her breasts, and Taeko, who kept pestering her with questions about her relationship with Hajime. A forbidden love between different races got every young high school girl's heart racing, after all.

Shea did her best to answer all the questions, despite being overwhelmed by Taeko's enthusiasm. Meanwhile, Yuka was resting her chin in her arms and looking out the window. She tried to look uninterested, but it was obvious she was curious too. She kept stealing glances at Shea, as she was the one most curious about how they had met.

Meanwhile, Hajime and Aiko's conversation was heading in an interesting direction.

Aiko had gleaned as much information as she could from Hajime. The more she learned, the more she was convinced someone had tried to kill him, but she still didn't want to believe it. When she'd asked him if anyone seemed particularly suspicious, Hajime had just snorted and said that everyone did.

Hajime had floated the possibility that it might have been Hiyama. He was, of course, right on the mark, but at present he only saw Hiyama as one of the possible suspects.

With the limited information she had, Aiko couldn't come to a definitive conclusion either. Even if she could, Aiko wasn't sure how to bring a potential murderer back on the right path, nor did she know how to make them atone for their crime.

She continued agonizing over it for a while longer, but the gentle rolling of the truck and the soft sheet she'd wrapped herself in beckoned her to the land of dreams. Finally, her head drooped

forward, and she fell fast asleep onto Hajime's lap.

Had it been anyone else, Hajime would have flung them off him. However, he couldn't bring himself to do that to Aiko, so after debating with himself for a few seconds, he decided to just leave her be.

Besides, it was his fault she hadn't slept last night. After all, it was the overload of information he'd dumped on her that had kept her up.

"I guess it's fine," he said in a rare display of tolerance.

"Hajime, you're nice to Aiko."

"Well, she has done a lot for me."

"Hmmm."

"Yue?"

"....."

"Come on, Yue, don't ignore me. Please?"

"Let me sleep on your lap next time."

"Sure..."

The two were soon flirting openly with each other, despite the fact that Aiko was still in his lap. In the back were two girls watching the spectacle up front with great interest, one girl staring out the window pretending not to care, but still stealing glances every now and again, and one sulking bunny girl. Behind them, three jealous pairs of eyes were burning a hole through the back window.

It was hard to believe this group was headed into dangerous territory where one highly skilled adventurer party had already gone missing.

The Northern Mountain Range. Mountains ranging from 1000 meters above sea level to 8000 meters above sea level existed within the range, and the flora and even environment varied drastically from mountain to mountain. One mountain might be covered in trees with leaves the vibrant color of fall, but the next mountain over would be a dense green jungle. And then there were mountains that resembled desolate wastelands.

Moreover, no matter how many mountains one scaled, they would only see a sea of mountains extending infinitely northward. The first four rows of mountains had been somewhat explored, but past that was unknown territory.

A number of ambitious adventurers had tried mapping the

entire range, but as the strength of the monsters grew with each progressive mountain, no one had yet managed to scale the fifth row.

The highest mountain in the first row was the so-called Sacred Mountain where the Holy Church's headquarters were.

The section of the range Hajime was approaching was about 600 kilometers east of that point. Directly in front of them was a towering slab of rock covered in the blazing red and yellow hues of fall. Those well versed in botany would notice various spices and herbs dotting the landscape as well. The mountain's vast bounty was one of the main reasons for Ur's prosperity.

Hajime stopped Brise at the foot of the mountain, and the students spent a moment enjoying the breathtaking view.

A few of the girls let out murmurs of appreciation. Meanwhile, Aiko had finally woken up, and was as red as the leaves behind her as she apologized profusely to Hajime. Fortunately, everyone else was too focused on the scenery to notice.

Suppressing his desire to enjoy the view for a little while longer, Hajime put Brise back in his Treasure Trove and pulled something else out.

A thirty centimeter long model bird and a ring with a tiny stone embedded inside it. The body of the bird was gray, but it had a crystal affixed to its head.

Hajime put the ring on, pulled another four model birds from his Treasure Trove, and threw them into the air. Contrary to expectations, the model birds did not fall to the ground. Instead, they floated freely in the sky. Aiko and the others gasped in surprise.

The four birds circled in place for a few seconds before gliding toward the mountain.

"Umm, what exactly..." Aiko trailed off as she watched the artificial birds glide away without making a single sound.

Hajime's reply was "Scouting drones." In a sense, these objects were even more unfit for a fantasy world than his guns or cars.

Hajime had crafted them with the same remotely controllable ore that Miledi had used to make the golems they'd fought in the Reisen Labyrinth. He'd stolen... or rather been gifted a large quantity of them before they had been unceremoniously thrown out.

While he had no aptitude for gravity magic, he had succeeded

in using his creation magic to enchant ore with gravity neutralizing magic, effectively creating floatstone. By infusing a spirit stone with gravity control magic, he had successfully created what he had dubbed esperrock. That was the nature of the crystals embedded into his drones.

Like the golems' eyes, by pouring mana into the esperrock he could reflect what it was seeing to another esperrock. This was how Miledi had kept track of Hajime's movements in the labyrinth.

Hajime had added a fragment of esperrock to his devil eye, so he could check what the drones were seeing whenever he pleased.

However, the brain's processing power was finite, and having four drones circle far overhead already brought him close to the limits of his brain's ability. Hajime couldn't figure out how Miledi had managed to control 50 golems at once.

Though, ever since he had learned Riftwalk, he had been able to train his brain's processing power like any other stat, and he had grown to the point where he could control a single drone with absolute precision without any noticeable drop in his own movements. Furthermore, when he activated Riftwalk, he could accurately control up to seven drones. Though that came with a time limit.

This time, though, he'd just brought his Ornises out to scout. They had a wide area to search, so he figured they would be useful.

As they watched Hajime's Ornises fly off into the distance, Aiko and the students swore to stop getting surprised at every little thing Hajime did. Unfortunately, they wouldn't be able to make good on that oath for a while.

Meanwhile, the party continued down the path Will had supposedly gone up.

According to the reports, the more dangerous monsters only started showing up a little over halfway up the mountain. In which case, it stood to reason that Will's party had been investigating that area. Hajime sent his Ornises out ahead to scout the area while he set a grueling pace.

After a little over an hour of walking, they finally reached their destination. They stopped there in order to investigate more thoroughly, and because...

After a little over an hour of walking, they finally reached their destination. They stopped there in order to investigate more thoroughly, and because...

“Haah... Haaah... F-Finally, we can take a break...Ugh... Haah... Haah...”

“Haah... Haaah... Are you alright... Ai-chan-sensei?”

“Ack... Urgh... Can we rest now? Haah... Haah... We can, right? I’m sitting down, okay?”

“Ahhhhhh...”

“Haaah... Haaah... You and your friends are monsters, Nagumo...” Aiko and the students had even less stamina than Hajime had expected.

Of course Aiko and the others had far greater stats than most people in this world, so climbing this far wouldn’t normally tire them out so. However, Hajime had been going so fast that they’d had to sprint all out just to keep up. And sprinting nonstop up an unfamiliar mountain path was more draining than they had expected.

Aiko was kneeling on the ground, panting for breath. Noboru and Akito were lying on their backs, gulping in huge lungfuls of air. Meanwhile, Nana looked like she was about to puke.

Surprisingly, Yuka and Taeko weren’t on the ground. They were leaning tiredly against a tree, but they didn’t look ready to collapse just yet. Probably because both of them had more frontline-centric jobs.

Yuka’s job was Acrobat, while Taeko’s was Whip Master. The former was a job that specialized in throwing weapons such as knives or darts, while the latter, as the name suggested, was proficient in whips, though they were also skilled in using all rope-like objects.

The sight of the delinquent-looking Yuka juggling knives, while the flashy Taeko swung a whip around was... depending on who you asked, either extremely surreal or extremely fitting. The class was split fifty-fifty on it.

Atsushi and Noboru were frontliners as well, but... their stamina was clearly lacking in comparison. Had anyone pointed it out, their hearts would probably have broken right then and there.

Hajime sighed as he looked over at the other students. Though in the end he was planning on searching the area anyway, so he supposed it was fine to let them take a break in the meantime. He decided to investigate a nearby river while they rested. Thanks to the view from his Ornises, he had a pretty good idea of the overall geography. He told Aiko where the river was and left the students

there. It was likely Will's party had stopped there to rest, too.

Hajime headed deeper into the mountains, with Yue and Shea in tow. The dried leaves littering the forest floor let out a satisfying crunching noise as they marched through the forested mountainside. Soon enough, they heard the sound of rushing water, indicating the river was nearby. The sounds of nature were pleasing to the ears. Shea especially was enjoying the walk, her rabbit ears flopping about happily.

The river was just a little too large to be classified as a stream. Shea, who had the best senses of the three, started scouting the area. Just to be safe, Hajime also swept their surroundings with his Ornis, but there didn't seem to be any monsters nearby. Sure that there wouldn't be any unpleasant surprises, the three of them sat down on a nearby boulder to discuss their strategy.

Halfway through, Yue kicked her shoes off so she could dip her toes in the river and relax for a bit. Hajime didn't want to waste time, but as it was unlikely Aiko and the others had recovered sufficiently yet anyway, he let it slide. It was obvious he spoiled Yue. Shea ended up taking advantage of his magnanimity as well.

Thinking they might have gone upstream, Hajime sent one of his Ornises further up to scout while he watched Yue splash about in the shallows. Shea was barefoot as well, but she'd chosen to just dip her feet in. It seemed she was just enjoying the ticklish sensation of water rushing past.

Finally, Aiko and the others recovered enough to catch up to Hajime. They weren't very happy about being left behind, so they glared testily at the trio when they arrived.

However, the guys' expressions changed instantly when they saw Yue and Shea playing in the river, barefoot.

"This is heaven," they exclaimed, and the girls' cold stares turned toward them. The guys trembled under the weight of their collective glares. Upon noticing everyone's arrival, Yue and Shea got out of the river.

Aiko and the others collapsed near the riverbank, and busied themselves with the task of replenishing lost fluids. Atsushi and the guys' leering gazes had bothered Yue and Shea a little, so they also glared at the boys on their way out, causing them to avert their gazes in fear. Aiko and the girls all turned to look at Hajime. They'd all heard a lot from Shea about his relationship with the two girls, so they were glaring at him in mild annoyance.

“Fufu, you seem to treasure Yue-san and Shea-san a lot, Nagumo-kun,” Aiko spoke with a smile.

No matter what he said, he doubted they’d like the answer, so Hajime just shrugged his shoulders. Still, Yue’s next action provided enough of an answer. She walked up to Hajime and plopped into his lap. Then, she wriggled her butt until she found a comfortable position.

“...Good.” After that, with a satisfied expression on her face, she leaned back. All but stating that she trusted Hajime completely. Feeling left out, Shea hopped up behind Hajime and hugged him. Hajime’s back was enveloped in twin mounds of pleasure.

Aiko and Yuka blushed, while Nana and Taeko started squealing. The guys, meanwhile, were gritting their teeth in frustration.

Hajime didn’t bother trying to peel them off. Instead, he turned away, clearly embarrassed.

However, a second later his expression turned serious.

“This is...”

“Hm...did you find something?” Hajime stared off into the distance, muttering to himself. Aiko and the students all gazed at him intently.

“Further upstream there’s a... shield, I think? And a bag... They both look new. This might be what we’re looking for. Yue, Shea, let’s go.”

“Okay.”

“Roger!”

The three of them stood up at the same time, then started packing up.

Honestly, Aiko and the other students were hoping to rest for a while longer, but they were the ones who had insisted they come along. Plus, it seemed Hajime had found some kind of clue. They roused their exhausted bodies and pushed themselves forward, struggling to keep up with the hellish pace Hajime set.

When they arrived, Hajime found a small metallic shield and a bag, just as he’d seen from his Ornis. However, what the Ornis had not been able to show him were the details. The round shield was dented in the center, and one of the bag’s straps was ripped.

They cautiously examined their surroundings. Upon doing so, they discovered that one of the nearby trees had had its bark ripped. Furthermore, it was stripped a full two meters up the tree’s

trunk. It looked like someone had meticulously scraped off all the bark, but judging from the height, no human could have done that.

Hajime asked Shea to scout the area with her ears, while he activated his own perception skills. Cautiously, he walked past the scraped tree.

The further he went, the more he found evidence of a fierce struggle. A tree snapped in half. A broken sword lying in the grass. Traces of blood. The more they found, the grimmer the students' expressions grew.

They'd already had their spirits broken once by the imminent fear of death, back in the Great Orcus Labyrinth. It was obvious from their pale faces that the scene had brought back memories of that time. Hajime could tell they were struggling to keep their composure.

He kept an eye on them as they progressed through the forest, absorbing each piece of evidence as he passed by it. Suddenly, Shea found something sparkling up ahead.

"Hajime-san, this is a pendant, isn't it?"

"Hm? Yeah... looks like it might have belonged to one of them. Let's find out."

Hajime took the pendant from Shea and brushed the dirt off. As he did, he realized it wasn't just a pendant, but a locket. He opened it to see a portrait of a woman. She must have been someone's lover, or maybe their wife. Wasn't that helpful as far as clues went, but considering how new it looked, it most likely belonged to one of the adventurers they were searching for. Hajime decided to keep it just in case.

They found a few other articles scattered about, and kept the ones that looked like they had been significant to their owners.

Searching the area took quite a bit of time, and the sun was beginning to set as they finished. They'd probably have to make camp for the night soon.

So far the only other living creatures they'd seen on the mountain had been animals. They'd been on alert for the monsters that had attacked Will, but they hadn't even seen a single hostile creature.

They were relatively close to the summit at that point. And, while they hadn't passed over the first mountain yet, they should still have encountered a few weak monsters so high up. It was unsettling how quiet their journey had been.

A short while later, Hajime sent out his Ornises to scout the area the previous adventurers had supposedly been requested to examine. About three hundred meters to the east, he found signs of large-scale destruction. Hajime hurried over, forcing everyone to go even faster to keep up.

They found a river larger than the almost-stream they'd stopped at earlier. There was even a small waterfall further upstream. Normally, said river would flow all the way down to the foot of the mountain, but something had gouged huge furrows into the earth, diverting its flow. The furrows were so precise that it looked like they'd been cut by a laser.

Not only that, but the earth and trees around the gouged earth had been scorched black. Some of the trees had been snapped clean in half, the upper halves of their trunks sometimes tens of meters away. Thirty-centimeter long footprints remained in the muddy riverbank.

"So this is where the fight really picked up... Judging by the footprints, we're dealing with some huge monster that walks on two legs... Supposedly, Bulltaurs roam around the area two mountains over, but the way the ground was cut clean through..."

The Bulltaurs Hajime was referring to were a kind of cross between the Orcs and Ogres usually found in RPGs. They weren't very intelligent, but they always roamed in packs, and their special magic was an inferior version of Diamond Skin, Steel Skin. They were a powerful race known for their high defensive capabilities. However, adventurers had only ever encountered them after cresting the second set of mountains, and even then they never crossed the peak to the village side of the second mountain range. More importantly, they didn't have any magic that would let them make such precise cuts into the ground like that.

Hajime squatted down and examined the footprints. He wasn't sure if they should head downstream or upstream next.

So far the traces of battle they'd found had suggested Will and the others had fled upstream, but he found it hard to imagine they'd continue heading in that direction after such a fierce fight. Considering their physical and mental exhaustion, it would have made little sense for them to flee away from town.

Having come to that conclusion, Hajime sent his Ornises upstream, electing to take the downstream path himself. Since the footprints were all near the riverbank, it was possible Will and the

others had escaped into the river. Exhausted by the fighting as they must have been, they'd probably opted to let the current carry them away.

The others agreed with Hajime's hypothesis, and they began trekking down the mountain.

Eventually, they came across another waterfall. This one was far larger than the tiny drop they'd seen earlier. Hajime, Yue, and Shea all jumped off the cliff and landed nimbly on the rocks below. The misty breeze characteristic to all waterfalls blew past them. It was a refreshing reprieve, tired as they were from searching all day.

It was at that moment that Hajime's Sense Presence detected something.

"Wha...! No way..."

"Hajime?" Yue was the first to react to Hajime's outburst. Hajime closed his eyes and concentrated. A few seconds later he opened them again, the surprise evident in his voice.

"Man, you've gotta be kidding me. My Sense Presence detected something, but it feels human. And it's... coming from behind the waterfall."

"There's a living person down there!?"

Hajime nodded in response to Shea's question.

"Just one?" Yue asked, to which Hajime's response was a simple confirmation.

Aiko and the others looked shocked as well. It was only natural, as while it was still theoretically possible someone had survived, Hajime hadn't actually expected to find anyone alive. Five days had passed since Will's party had gone missing. If the survivor was one of them, it'd be a miracle.

"Yue, I'm counting on you."

"...Okay."

Hajime didn't take his eyes off the pool of water surrounding the waterfall. Guessing what Hajime wanted, Yue raised her right hand and activated her magic.

"Liquid Rampart. Wind Wall."

The water around the waterfall was pushed to either side, the wind wall keeping the resulting spray from soaking them. Yue looked like Moses parting the Red Sea with her hand outstretched like that. The spell Liquid Rampart made barriers of water, and Yue had used the existing river water to create hers.

Aiko and the students' jaws dropped open in shock yet again as

they watched Yue cast two different elemental spells without an incantation or even a magic circle. The ancient Jews had probably been just as surprised when Moses had performed his miracle.

Yue's mana supply wasn't infinite, so Hajime ushered everyone along. They walked past the waterfall into the cavern behind it.

The cavern angled upward, and it opened up into a rather spacious room after they got through a narrow passage. Water and light poured into the room from above, the water creating a large puddle in the center. Seeing as the puddle didn't overflow, it stood to reason that it connected to the river somehow.

They found a man in the furthest corner of the room. As they approached, they could make out his features better. He was young, probably no more than twenty, with graceful features. At the moment, though, that graceful face was pale as a sheet, ruining the effect. However, he didn't seem to be injured, and his bag still had a little food left in it. From the looks of it, he was just asleep. His pale features were probably due to the terror of hiding out alone.

Aiko looked at him, clearly worried, but Hajime was in a hurry to find out who he was. He flicked the sleeping man on the forehead with his artificial arm.

"Guwah!" He awoke with a scream and covered his forehead with both hands. Aiko shuddered at Hajime's callousness.

Hajime ignored Aiko and crouched down in front of the crying man. He didn't bother mincing words.

"Are you Will Cudeta? The third son of the Cudeta family?"

"I, uhh... Who are you guys? What are you doing here?" The man's eyes darted about wildly. Hajime got his hand ready for another flick and rested it against the man's forehead.

"Answer the question. Every time you tell me something other than an answer, I'm going to flick you twice as hard as the last time."

"Huh!?"

"Are you Will Cudeta?"

"Umm... Uwaah, yes! I am! I'm Will Cudeta! That's me!" The man stammered for a moment, but Hajime's sharp glare silenced any protests he might have, and he answered with more vigor than his pale face would suggest.

So he really is Will Cudeta. By some miracle, he had actually survived.

"I see. I'm Hajime. Hajime Nagumo. I've come looking for you

at Chief Ilwa Chang's request. I'm glad you're alive." *That'll make life much easier.*

"Ilwa-san sent you!? I see. I guess... I owe him another debt for this. Umm, thank you for coming here. If Ilwa-san sent you, you must be pretty strong."

There was a mixture of gratitude and respect in his gaze. It seemed he wasn't too bothered by that earlier flick to his forehead. He seemed like a surprisingly nice fellow. Completely unlike that other pig-faced noble Hajime had encountered.

Glad he didn't have to beat an answer out of Will, Hajime motioned for Yue and Shea to introduce themselves before asking what had happened.

In short, this was what happened to them:

Will and his party were climbing up the same mountain path Hajime had taken when they were set upon by ten Bulltaurs.

Unwilling to take on such a force, the party began to retreat. However, more and more Bulltaurs kept on coming and, before long, they had been driven up to the river a little over halfway up the mountain.

Surrounded and driven into a corner, the party's paladin and swordsman gave their lives to let the others escape. Forced further upward by the advancing horde of Bulltaurs, the party arrived at the second river, only to meet their doom.

A black dragon was waiting for them.

The moment they burst out on the riverbank, it had fired its searing breath at them, sending Will flying into the river. As he was being washed downstream the last thing he'd seen was one member of the party get completely incinerated, while the remaining two were trapped between a dragon and a horde of Bulltaurs.

After falling down the waterfall he'd stumbled into this cavern, and had been hiding inside ever since.

His tale sounded pretty similar to a certain someone's.

Will's emotions got the better of him halfway through his story, and by the time he finished he was in tears. He'd basically forced his way into their party, and yet the adventurers he'd traveled with hadn't so much as looked annoyed when he asked them to teach him their skills or share stories about their adventures.

And yet he hadn't even tried to save them. He'd just hidden down here in this cave like a coward, praying for someone to come save him.

He hated himself even more for feeling relieved when help had finally arrived, even though his comrades had all died.

Those feelings had all come to a head when he recounted his tale, which was why he was a sobbing mess.

“I-I’m the worsht. Everyone died, but even though I wash usheless, I survived... and then... I even felt happy when I learned I wash shaved!” Will’s sobs echoed through the cavern. No one said anything. No one knew what to say to the sobbing young man who blamed himself for his comrades’ deaths. Yuka and the others especially so, because they understood exactly what he was feeling.

Aiko gently patted Will on the back, her expression pained.

Yue was as expressionless as always, while Shea was at a loss for words.

But when Will finally paused to take breath, the person everyone had least expected to say anything comforted him.

Hajime.

He walked over, grabbed Will by the collar, and hoisted him up into the air. When he spoke, his tone was surprisingly gentle.

“What’s so wrong about wanting to live? What’s so bad about being happy that you survived? Those feelings are the most natural thing in the world. For a human, wanting to survive is a praiseworthy trait.”

“B-But... I...”

“If you feel bad for your dead comrades... then live on. Even if you have to crawl on the ground dredging for scraps, survive. As long as you keep struggling... eventually, the day will come when you realize there was meaning in you surviving this day.”

“Live... on.” Tears still in his eyes, Will blankly repeated Hajime’s words.

Hajime thrust Will back to the ground and mumbled some words.

“What the hell’s wrong with me?” His speech had been half-directed at himself. When he’d heard Will lamenting his own survival, it had somehow felt like he was saying it was a mistake for Hajime to have survived. That was what had gotten Hajime so worked up.

Of course, that was just his persecution complex rearing its ugly head. What he’d done wasn’t much different from a kid throwing a temper tantrum. Despite how mature he tried to act, Hajime was still a seventeen year old boy. He still had a lot of growing up to do.

Having realized his mistake, Hajime was stewing in a rare moment of self-loathing. Seeing his expression, Yue walked over and gently took him his hand in hers.

"It's okay. You said the right thing, Hajime."

"...Yue."

"Live, with everything you've got. We're going to survive together, right?"

"Haha, you're right. No matter what comes our way, we'll make it through alive. I promise I won't leave you alone."

"...Good."

Before long, Hajime and Yue were lost in their own little world, Will's existence completely forgotten. *I'm really no match for her,* Hajime thought as he gently stroked Yue's cheek. She nuzzled happily against his hand. Shea was, of course, glaring at them reproachfully. Her ears were twitching angrily, as if to say "How dare you leave me out again!"

Meanwhile, Hajime's words had really hit home to Aiko and the others. They were the words of someone who'd had to change his appearance and even the very core of his being to crawl out of the abyss alive. Ever since their reunion he'd always been cold and aloof, but for the first time they'd seen him get heated up.

His passion resonated just a little in the hearts of Yuka and the others, who were still trapped by the fear of death. His words felt like the first rays of spring after a long and cold winter.

For a while, the students all stared at each other, lost in their thoughts. Will was still in a daze after being unfairly yelled at and then unceremoniously thrown away. Shea was still desperately trying to get Hajime and Yue's attention, while the latter were still lost in each other's eyes. The mood was so sickeningly sweet that one would think Hajime had transmuted the air to sugar.

Finally, Will managed to get everyone's attention, and the party began preparing to descend. There was still an hour until darkness fell, so if they hurried they could reach the foot of the mountain before the day was up.

True, the sudden appearance of a Bulltaur herd and a black dragon were worrying developments, but they weren't part of Hajime's mission. Besides, it was unreasonable of anyone to expect Hajime to investigate those incidents while protecting such a weak group.

Will realized he'd just be a burden too, so he agreed that they

should withdraw. Atsushi's sense of justice compelled him to argue that they should investigate further and save the townspeople from their plight, but with such dangerous monsters as Bulltaurs and black dragons roaming about, Aiko was having none of it. So, in the end, it was decided they would leave the mountain.

But of course, it was too much to hope everything would go according to plan. The moment the group exited the waterfall cavern using Yue's magic, they were greeted by a fearsome sight.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" A dragon, its scales jet black and its eyes glinting a cruel gold, glared down at them from the sky.

It was easily seven meters long. Claws as big and sharp as swords jutted from its forelegs. The wings sprouting from its back were glimmering faintly, covered in a sheen of mana.

That explains it. Every time the dragon flapped its wings, an unbelievably powerful gust of wind blew past them. Still, what stood out most of all were the two eyes that glowed as gold as the moon amidst a sea of pitch black. Its pupils were slitted, giving them a reptilian appearance, while its eyes were narrowed in a dangerous glare, making the light they emitted all the more beautiful.

It let out another low roar. The overwhelming pressure it exuded was far greater than the wyverns Hajime had fought at the bottom of the Reisen Gorge, the Hyverias. Most people considered Hyverias among the most dangerous monsters that roamed the surface, but this black dragon made them feel like nothing more than little birds. Truly, its majesty made it fit to be called the ruler of the skies.

Aiko and the others froze in place, deer caught in headlights. Will was trembling so fiercely that he looked ready to collapse on the spot. He was probably having flashbacks to the last time he'd been attacked.

He had expected a suitably powerful monster when he saw the furrows in the ground, but he hadn't expected something as deadly as the black dragon currently in front of him. This was at least three times more powerful than what he'd anticipated.

He was sure its strength couldn't compare to the Hydra he'd fought at the bottom of the abyss, but it was at least as powerful as the monsters he'd found 90 floors down.

Upon spotting Will, the dragon's gaze focused on him. Then, it suddenly reared its head back and opened its jaw, revealing rows of

razor-sharp teeth. It began focusing a tremendous amount of mana into its mouth.

Kiiiiiiiiiiiiiaaaaaaa! A strange keening sound echoed throughout the sunset orange mountains. Hajime suddenly remembered Will describing the breath that had gouged out part of the river and incinerated an adventurer on the spot.

"Everyone, run!" Hajime leaped to the side as he screamed. Yue and Shea followed suit. However, most people... No, everyone else didn't react to Hajime's warning.

They couldn't. Aiko, Yuka, the other students, and even Will were still frozen in place. Aiko and the others were too surprised to react properly, but Will was frozen in fear. He couldn't even summon the presence of mind to look away.

"Tch!"

"Hajime!"

"Hajime-san!"

Hajime used Telepathy to relay orders to Yue and Shea, then used Supersonic Step to return to the spot he'd been in seconds ago, putting him directly between the dragon and the students.

Normally, he would have just left them to fend for themselves, but he didn't hate Aiko and the others enough that he'd be comfortable just watching them die. And if he let Will, who by some miracle had survived, die, then what was the point of him accepting this mission in the first place? He'd taken on a contract to bring Will back if he found him alive, and he wasn't one to renege on his promises.

Hajime pulled a two-meter tall coffin-shaped shield out of his Treasure Trove and connected it to his prosthetic left arm. He started pouring mana into it, and a giant spike popped out of the bottom half with a pneumatic hiss. He thrust it into the ground as hard as he could.

A second later, the dragon's black breath cut through the air with the precision of a laser. It traveled faster than sound, smashing into Hajime's shield with a thunderous roar not even a second after it had been fired. The waves of heat radiating off the black laser were so great that they melted the ground around him.

"Guooooooh!" Hajime let out a bestial roar as he pushed back against the breath's force. Hajime's body, along with the shield, began to glow a deep crimson. He was using his Diamond Skin. His magic held out for a while, and even pushed the breath back a short

distance, but finally the breath broke through and slammed into the shield once more.

And yet, his shield withstood the impact. Heat powerful enough to break through his Diamond Skin assailed the shield, slowly melting through it. However, every time it looked like the breath would break through, Hajime mended his shield with his transmutation.

Though he'd driven the spiked bottom of the shield into the ground, the force was still enough to slowly push him back. Hajime transmuted spikes into the bottom of his shoes as well, then cast Diamond Skin once more. He pushed his left arm a little further out, while supporting the shield with his right as well.

Hajime's shield was made with a mixture of taur and shtar ore, and layered with an outer coating of azantium.

Since he was a Synergist, he could withstand an attack powerful enough to melt even azantium. So long as the ore bought him a few seconds, he could always transmute it back to perfect condition. And even if someone did manage to somehow break past the azantium layer, they'd then have to contend with the shtar layer underneath. As shtar's hardness was proportional to the amount of mana poured into it, so long as Hajime had mana left to spare, it would never be broken.

Since it took the breath more than a few seconds to melt through the azantium layer, the dragon had no hope of piercing Hajime's shield. However, it did possess enough strength to blow him away along with his shield.

Even Hajime, with his superhuman strength, was slowly getting pushed back. There were deep divots in the ground made by the spikes he'd transmuted into the shield and his boots as he'd been forced back.

Hajime, with his inhuman stamina, his shield, and his Diamond Skin ability wasn't in any real danger of taking damage, but the people behind him would be incinerated by the dragon's breath, leaving not even ashes behind, if he was blown away.

As he was fretting over what to do, he suddenly felt something soft at his back.

"Nagumo!"

"Nagumo-kun!"

He glanced back in surprise. To his utter amazement, Yuka and Aiko were trying to support him by pushing his back with all their

might. It looked like they'd finally returned to their senses, saw Hajime being pushed back, and had come to help.

Aiko simply looked desperate, but Yuka's face, illuminated by the red and black fireworks display that was Hajime's mana colliding with the breath weapon, was deathly pale. She was trembling, not because of the force crashing into them, but because the trauma of what had happened in the labyrinth was still haunting her. The fact that she was still trying despite that was proof of her courage.

Seeing those two brought Atsushi back to his senses as well. With a spirited yell, he ran up to Hajime, and a second later Taeko, Nana, and even Will followed suit.

The barrage showed no signs of stopping. The heat had long since evaporated the river water, so the force of the impact kept sending half-melted stones flying out of the riverbed.

Hajime could no longer tell how much time had passed. It felt like an eternity to him, but in reality scarcely 10 seconds had gone by. He grit his teeth in determination, and at the same time, he heard the long awaited voice of his salvation.

"Heavensfall." A whirling black sphere that was about four meters in diameter appeared above the black dragon's head. Its darkness was so absolute that it felt as if one would be sucked into it if they just stole a glance at it. That ominous black sphere fell to the earth, crushing the dragon beneath it.

"Graaaaaaaaaah!?" The stream was interrupted as the dragon roared in pain, grounded by Yue's sphere, but her spell was far from done. It pressed down on the dragon with even greater force, enough to create a dragon-sized depression in the ground.

This was the gravity spell Heavensfall. One of Yue's newly acquired spells. That whirling black sphere increased its gravitational force in proportion to the amount of mana poured into it. It could also change the gravitational orientation of its target, making it a very versatile spell.

When used on oneself, gravity magic required surprisingly little mana. However, when used on other objects, the air, or other people, it required exponentially more. Even Yue had needed ten seconds to cast it. Plus, it drained an alarming amount of her mana. Though she still hadn't completely mastered the skill, so it was likely she'd be able to cut down the cast time and mana cost the more she trained.

The ruler of the skies had been forced to the ground, and it didn't take kindly to that. It mustered all of its strength and rose to its feet. However, before it could do anything else, Shea came hurtling down toward it, Drucken at the ready.

"Here's the finisher!" Shea yelled, rabbit ears flapping wildly in the wind. She used numerous shotgun blasts to accelerate her fall, swinging her hammer down at the dragon's head.

There was a thunderous impact as she landed.

The force of her blow created a crater so large that it looked like the area had just been bombed. Her smash had been a magnitude more powerful than the one she'd used on the Miledi Golem.

The reason being that of all the improvements Hajime had added to Drucken, chief among them was enchanting the compressed azantium that made up her hammer with gravity magic. However, instead of neutralizing Drucken's weight, he'd multiplied it, so it could grow even heavier depending on how much mana was poured into it. As it was, Drucken resembled the hundred ton hammer from a certain famous manga.

Anyone or anything that took that head on would likely be annihilated. If they took it head-on, anyway...

"Graaaaaaah!" A fireball hurtled toward Yue from amid the dust surrounding the dragon. Yue adjusted her gravity so that she "fell" to the right and avoided it. However, she had to cancel Heavensfall in order to do so.

As the dust settled, Hajime could see that the dragon had managed to avoid Drucken by a hair's breadth. It had pulled out every last ounce of its strength in order to do so.

The dragon circled in place, swinging its tail angrily at Shea.

"Wawawa!?" Shea managed to just pull Drucken out in time, and use it as a shield. At the same time, she leaped into the air, deadening the impact, but sending her flying backward through the trees.

Having regained its footing, the dragon rest its golden-eyed gaze on Hajime... or rather right past Hajime and at Will.

Hajime quickly returned the shield to his Treasure Trove and pulled out Donner and Schlag, firing them as fast as he could.

A barrage of bullets slammed into the dragon, leaving a trail of red streaks in their wake. Unable to dodge such a fast attack, the dragon was blown backward into the river. A massive spray of

water rose into the air as it fell.

Realizing it was dangerous to keep the fighting near Will, Hajime charged after it. He reloaded Donner and Schlag as he ran, firing a second barrage soon after.

The dragon rose from the river with a roar, sending another wave of water splashing everywhere. It ignored Hajime entirely and fired another fireball at Will.

"Ah!" Hajime had launched this series of fierce attacks to draw the dragon's attention to him, but it appeared that it had eyes only for Will.

"Yue!"

"Okay— Liquid Barricade!"

Will let out a very unmanly shriek and shrunk back. However, before the fireball could hit him, a giant wall of water rose up to protect him. The fireball dissipated as it slammed into Yue's Liquid Barricade.

"W-We've gotta help them!"

"Y-Yeah!"

Barely able to keep up with lightning pace of the battle, Yuka pulled out her artifacts, a collection of legendary throwing knives. There were twelve of them and they had the unique ability to attract each other, so as long as Yuka kept one in her hand, she could recall all the others. She wrapped her knives in a wreath of flame and threw them at the dragon.

At the same time, Atsushi pulled out his twin shamshirs and swung them down. His job was "Arabian Kirito" and his artifacts let loose razor sharp blades of wind every time he swung them.

However, Yuka's flaming knives and Atsushi's wind blades didn't even so much as scratch the dragon's jet-black scales.

Dismayed, Yuka and Atsushi nevertheless dutifully readied their knives and shamshirs once more. Seeing them struggle so desperately, Noboru, Akito, Nana, and Taeko all found their courage and started firing long-range attacks from behind the safety of Yue's water barrier.

"Gwaaaaaaah!" This time their attacks didn't even reach the dragon, as its roar blew all the projectiles away. The ferocity of the roar and the intensity of its glare left them trembling in fear once more, and Taeko and Nana even fell over.

"Tch! Sensei, take those fools and get out of here!"

"But... Nagumo-kun..."

Their spirited display of courage had ended in vain, leaving the students shivering in terror. Hajime could tell they'd be of no use, so he urged Aiko to take them somewhere safe.

However, Aiko hesitated. No matter how he acted, Hajime was still one of her students, and she was loathe to leave him behind to fight such a powerful monster alone.

Meanwhile, the dragon had finally risen out of the river and flown back into the sky. It unleashed a torrent of fireballs at the ground below. As always, its target was Will.

Hajime was bombarding it with bullets, but he wasn't able to attract its attention in the slightest. The dragon's scales were as hard as the scorpion Hajime had fought in the past, and even his full-power railgun shells did little more than dent them.

Its focus was completely on Will. It was almost as if it was being controlled by something. A robot obediently following out its orders. Only attacks powerful enough to interfere with its efforts to kill Will could grab its attention, and even then only temporarily.

Hajime had no idea why whoever was controlling this dragon wanted Will dead, but it made his job easier. He shouted out his plan to Yue.

"Yue, focus on protecting Will! I'll get the dragon!"

"Okay, got it!" Yue instantly swapped her gravitational orientation to Will, zoomed toward him, and righted herself just before colliding with him. She was mildly annoyed at the fact that Aiko and the others couldn't even get out of the line of fire, but considering their level of skill, she realized it was to be expected.

"If you don't want to die, get behind me..." Yue had zero interest in the students, but as Aiko was someone Hajime seemed to respect, she at least made a token effort to protect her. Besides, it would just make her life harder if they started moving around, so it was easier on her to keep them quiet.

Taeko, Nana, Noboru, and Akito all scuttled about in a helpless panic, but Yuka, Atsushi, and Aiko at least had the presence of mind to retreat behind Yue's ice barrier, cursing their helplessness all the while.

In truth, they were at least a little stronger than this. However, even after learning Hajime had survived, even after finding the strength to stand up once more, the trauma they'd experienced that day wouldn't disappear so easily. The day they'd nearly been slaughtered by the Behemoth and the Traum Soldiers, the day

they'd seen Hajime "die" had been imprinted firmly onto their minds and hearts.

And even if they *could* fight at their full potential, the dragon's strength was on a completely different level. They wouldn't even be able to scratch its scales. All they could do was watch the battle unfold as they hid behind Yue's beautifully crafted ice wall.

Knowing that Will was safely under Yue's protection, Hajime was finally able to go all out.

The dragon was still wholeheartedly focused on tearing down Yue's barrier. Realizing fireballs wouldn't be enough, it once again arched its head back and began concentrating its mana.

"Hah, this is the first time I've been ignored even after shooting at something... Well, I'll just have to make sure you won't be able to ignore me any longer!" Hajime holstered Donner and Schlag, then pulled Schlagen, his anti-materiel rifle, out of his Treasure Trove. After that, he activated his Lightning Field. Red sparks started shooting down Schlagen's barrel.

Realizing whatever Hajime had up his sleeve might be fatal, the dragon finally turned its gaze to him. As expected, it couldn't ignore something so dangerous.

Hajime fired the same instant the dragon unleashed its breath. A single red streak and a cloud of black death collided with each other, creating an explosion of crimson and black.

The resulting shockwave was so ferocious that it uprooted nearby trees and sent them hurtling through the air. In terms of power, Hajime's bullet and the dragon's breath were about equal.

However, there was a fundamental difference in the composition of the two attacks, which was the decisive difference. The dragon's breath weapon was a continual attack, while a Schlagen was designed to pierce through a single point. That was why the bullet was able to come out the victor.

The bullet slammed into the dragon's head from below, making it snap backward. The full metal jacket bullet had packed quite a punch even after making it through the cloud of death.

However, it was nowhere near a fatal wound. That being said, with the breath's trajectory so abruptly changed, the dragon didn't have time to stop the outpouring of mana in time to prevent it from losing a few teeth and one of its wings.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" Roaring in pain, the dragon fell to the ground in a spectacular tailspin.

Hajime quickly used Aerodynamic to avoid the breath, and then used it again in the air, along with Supersonic Step. His foot slammed into the dragon's unprotected stomach, powered by both the accelerated speed of his fall and the strength of his Steel Legs skill.

The dragon's body doubled over as his kick collided. The force of the impact sent cracks running through the ground. It let out another agonized roar, but clearly hadn't actually taken that much damage. After all, its scales were tough enough to fend off a railgun.

Still, fact was that Hajime hadn't expected his kick to do much to begin with, so he swiftly raised his left arm. It let out a high pitched metallic whine. Then, he activated one of the gimmicks he'd installed into it, the high frequency oscillator, before bringing it down on the dragon.

"Ever feel what it's like to get sucker punched?" There was a dangerous gleam in Hajime's eyes and feral grin on his face. He mercilessly brought his fist down on the dragon, something that had pulverized a boulder in one blow.

There was a loud boom, which made cracks start appearing on the dragon's scales, but with the way the impact had been transferred, Hajime was certain there must have been some damage to its internal organs as well.

"Graaaah!?" Blood spurted from the dragon's mouth along with a roar this time. This was more pain than it had ever felt before. Its eyes were still glazed over with confusion, but it already realized it'd be dangerous to let Hajime remain near it. It poured an enormous amount of mana into its remaining wing and unleashed a gale of epic proportions to blow him off it before quickly returning to a standing position.

Hajime once again used Aerodynamic to leap out of harm's way, but not before leaving a few presents for the dragon.

The dragon warily eyed Hajime, but was suddenly rocked by an explosion originating from its stomach. The blast was powerful enough to send the dragon hurtling through the air. Hajime had stuffed some grenades in the cracks in its scales before flying to safety.

"Kraaaaaaaaah!" The dragon doubled over in pain, letting out more of a whimper than a roar. Its head drooped over and blood dripped from its mouth. This time it had been grievously wounded.

Its attention was now fully on Hajime and not Will. It opened its jaws once more and let loose a torrent of fireballs.

They exploded at random, like a burst of anti-aircraft fire, but none of them even came close to touching Hajime. Using a combination of Aerodynamic and Supersonic Step, he nimbly wove through the barrage of explosions, leaving afterimages in his wake. He continued using hit-and-run tactics to whittle down the dragon's strength.

He used Donner and Schlag to target its claws, gums, eyes, tail, basically any spot that seemed even mildly unguarded. Then, whenever he saw an opening, he'd close in and use his oscillator arm to pound the dragon's head, flank, and any other vital areas he could reach.

"Graaaah! Gwaaaah!" The dragon was clearly in agony at this point. Its scales were cracked everywhere, and blood was pouring from its mouth in great gouts.

"Holy shit..." Atsushi muttered in awe as he watched the battle behind the safety of Yue's ice wall. Yuka, Aiko, and the others all silently nodded in agreement. Everyone's eyes were glued to the spectacle unfolding before them. Even Will was watching with such unabashed excitement that it was hard to believe he'd been shuddering in terror mere minutes ago.

Halfway through the fight Shea had returned and had been about to join in, when she'd been stopped by Yue, who had guessed Hajime's true purpose for fighting so savagely, so she was standing next to her as a spectator. She'd been blown away without a chance to strut her stuff, which left her a little dispirited, though. Her bunny ears were drooping over too.

The reason he didn't finish the dragon off with Schlagen, Orkan, or any of his other heavy duty weapons was to show just how powerful he was to Aiko and the others.

He was using the dragon to show off different combat strategies. After all, while the dragon's attacks were powerful, its huge frame made it an easy target, and its telegraphed attacks showed that as long as it was easy to dodge, a powerful attack meant nothing. The fact that he was practically using this fight as a lesson showed that he wasn't even breaking a sweat fighting such a weak opponent.

He wanted to make an example of his power on the off chance that Aiko told the Holy Church, the king, or Kouki about his

blasphemous remarks after they parted ways. He wanted to show her that there was nothing even an entire nation could to do stop him.

It might've looked like Hajime was just using the dragon as his punching bag, which he was, but its tenacity still impressed him. He had managed to crack its scales, but he still hadn't been able to shatter a single one. Its stamina and defensive power were truly admirable. Out of curiosity, he had used Ore Appraisal on the scales, but there'd been no reaction, which meant that if the scales weren't organic matter, they weren't any kind of material Hajime could transmute.

After a while, Hajime decided he'd put on enough of a show. Deciding to finish it off, he quickly stepped into the dragon's blind spot, then kicked it onto its back once more. Taking advantage of its sluggish movements, he pulled his pile bunker out of his Treasure Trove.

Atsushi and the other guys began murmuring to each other, but Hajime ignored them and fixed the anchors in place. Once that was done, he activated his Lighting Field. He'd picked the pile bunker because he hadn't tested it out at full power yet, so wanted to see what it could accomplish.

He set the azantium-coated stake spinning, making sparks fly off the bunker. He had no doubt his four ton stake would instantly kill the dragon.

However, as the saying went, even a cornered mouse would bite a cat. It was when a beast was wounded that it was at its most dangerous. It seemed black dragons were no exception.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" With an ear-splitting roar, the dragon let loose a monstrous shockwave. It was no more than a haphazard explosion of mana, but it was powerful enough to shake loose Hajime, who'd not only strengthened his already ridiculously powerful body to the limit with body strengthening, but had also had the pile bunker's anchors to keep him in place. The force nearly wrenched his artificial arm out of its socket. The dragon then rolled over in an attempt to send Hajime flying.

"Uoooh!?" He stumbled back a few steps. That was enough to foul his aim, and his pile bunker fired harmlessly up toward the sky. Hajime spared only a glance to the stake that had vanished into the horizon before turning his attention back to the dragon. He correctly predicted that it would attempt to take Will with it in a

final futile act of resistance.

"Tch, Shea!"

"R-Roger!"

Hajime chided himself for letting his guard down before calling out to Shea. Using the ice wall as a foothold, Shea leaped into the air, then hurtled toward the dragon like a meteorite, using her shotgun blasts to propel her forward. She was determined not to miss this time.

In perfect condition the dragon might have stood a chance at dodging, but weakened as it was, it had no hope of escaping Shea's wrath.

Shea poured as much mana as she could into Drucken, turning an already heavy warhammer into a dense force of destruction. It slammed into the dragon's head with a resounding crash.

The force of the blow had Shea doing a near handstand as her body flew into the air, and the dragon's head slammed into the ground with earth-shattering force. After the shockwaves died down, silence reigned on the mountainside.

"Phew. That should make up for my mess up earlier. But man, this thing's tough..." Shea exclaimed in surprise as she put Drucken away.

Her surprise was to be expected, as while many of the scales on its head had cracked, and some had shattered, it was in surprisingly good shape. Its defensive power was truly fearsome.

"Hmm? Yeah, looks like it's at least as tough as the monsters in the abyss. Wonder how many mountain ranges it had to pass to get here." Half-amazed, half just annoyed, Hajime walked up to the collapsed dragon. His Sense Presence told Hajime the dragon was still alive, so he moved in to finish it off.

The giant spike Hajime's pile bunker had fired into the sky smashed into the ground between them.

What perfect timing. Hajime was suddenly reminded of the idiom More had told him. "Only a fool kicks a dragon's arse."

Hajime activated his Steel Arms and pulled the stake out of the ground. He carried it on his shoulder as he circled around to the dragon's rear. Then, he held the spike like a javelin, and prepared to toss it into the dragon's ass. The massive black spike would be more than enough to finish the job.

Everyone grimaced as they realized what Hajime was planning on doing. True, shattering the dragon's scales seemed like a

daunting task, but this was still too much. Everyone except Yue and Shea shuddered at his merciless decision, but Hajime paid them no mind.

"Let's see how you like this being shoved up your ass, you stupid dragon." Without a moment's hesitation, he plunged black the spike as far into the dragon's butt as he could.

A second later—

"Aaaaaaaaah! How dare youuu!" The dragon let out an anguished scream as it opened its eyes.

As the spike had only gone in halfway, Hajime had been planning on punching it in further, but the dragon's screams, which sounded very much like words, surprised him so much that he unclenched his fist.

"My backside~ My poor backside~" Its pained, agonized, and oddly impassioned scream was so unexpected that it shocked everyone stiff.

It would seem that this dragon... was no ordinary monster.

"Take it out~ Please take it out~" The voice that echoed through the riverbed sounded pitiful. And decidedly feminine. The dragon's jaws weren't moving, so she was clearly using some kind of wide-area telepathy to broadcast her voice. That made sense, as it was unlikely a dragon's mouth and vocal cords would be able to produce anything resembling human speech.

However, it was impossible for monsters to understand or use human speech. The only exception being a strange fish with a human-shaped face. Leaving that aside, no other monsters had been seen using language of any sort.

Though the presence of a black dragon here itself was out of the ordinary. It made absolutely no sense for a monster on par with the creatures Hajime had faced off in the labyrinth to be wandering the surface like this. And if by some chance there *was* a dragon's nest nearby, there's no way it would have remained hidden.

That left only two possibilities. First, that it was an undocumented kind of monster that had come from beyond the fifth layer of mountains, where no one had ever explored. Or second...

"Are you... one of the dragonmen?" The dragon stiffened up upon hearing Hajime's question. However a second later it let out a defeated sigh. It appeared that it hadn't wanted the fact that it was a dragonman to be found out. Still, at this point, she could no longer hide it. It would be pointless to try and deny it now.

“How could I make such a blunder...” she muttered regretfully. She wasn’t sure if the boy before her had found out because of how odd her movements had been while she was controlled, or because she’d accidentally spoke after being nailed in the ass... Chances were it was both.

“...Indeed. I am a proud member of the dragonman race. There are a number of reasons why I ended up here. I will explain all, so may I please ask that you remove that object from my anus? I am nearly out of mana. And if I was to return to my original form as is... suffice to say my backside would end up in a most... unsightly state.”

Hajime’d still been unsure when he asked, but it looked like his guess had been on the money.

Hajime was quite frankly amazed by this strange “luck” of his. Ever since he’d arrived in this world, he’d had a penchant of running into rare or unique existences. Yue was a vampire, a race thought to have gone extinct three hundred years ago. On top of that, she was royalty. Meanwhile Shea also exhibited traits of atavism, or at least that was the prevailing theory, and now he was face to face with a dragonman, a race thought to have gone extinct five hundred years ago. Fate seemed to enjoy matching him up with extraordinary people.

“...What are you doing here?” As Hajime was still pondering over his strange karma, Yue took over the questioning. Even for a vampire the dragonmen were a legendary race. And just like Yue, this dragon was quite possibly the last survivor of her race. Naturally, Yue was interested. Curiosity sparkled in her eyes.

“Like I said, I will explain so please take that thing out of me... My mana is nearly depleted... Hey, stop that! Don’t keep pounding it in! The stimulation— The stimulation will—”

“Yue’s the one asking questions here, you punk!” Hajime said, acting like a common thug, and started pounding on the spike with his fist.

The black dragon writhed and screamed. The solemn dignity she’d radiated upon their first meeting was nowhere to be found.

“What’s a member of a lost race doing here of all places, and why are you so determined to kill a single adventurer... I’m pretty interested in the answer myself. I suppose I can delay shoving this all the way through to your mouth until you answer at least. If you want to show me your gratitude, hurry up and talk.”

The dragonman's actions had been so unnatural that he was willing to delay killing his enemy until he figured out the details of what had happened. Of course he didn't stop pounding the spike in, just slowed down a little.

"Aah n-not sho hard~ I-I'll talk, so stop!"

Aiko and the others were appalled by Hajime's callous attitude, but he ignored them. But if he kept going the dragon probably wouldn't be able to talk so he stopped. He kept his hand on the spike so he could resume at any time though.

Relieved, the black dragon let out a sigh. She hurriedly began explaining what had happened. Hajime wasn't sure if the sensuality he sensed in her voice was just his imagination or not

"I was being controlled. I had no intention of attacking you people. However, the man who took control of me ordered me to find and kill that young man and his comrades."

She beckoned to Will with her gaze. Will started trembling again, but he bravely met the dragon's gaze. Something inside him had changed after watching Hajime's fight.

"But why? And how?"

"Allow me to start from the beginning. I am..."

In short, this was what happened:

There was something the black dragon needed to do, which was why she had left the dragonmen's hidden village. That something was to investigate the visitors that had been summoned from another world. While there were many more details, the gist of it was a dragonman with especially good perception had sensed a huge outpouring of mana a few months ago, and had surmised that someone had come to this world.

The dragonmen had a policy of non-intervention when it came to the affairs of the rest of the world, but they couldn't afford to remain ignorant about these mysterious visitors, and thus sent someone to investigate.

That someone had been the black dragon Hajime had just fought. Originally her plan had been to cross the mountains, then transform into a more human appearance and mix in with the people. From there she would have hidden her heritage as a dragonman and set about gathering information. On her way here, she had stopped for a rest in the valley between the first and second mountain ranges. As there were still dangerous monsters roaming that area, she had used the special magic granted to all dragonmen,

Dragonification, to transform into her black dragon appearance before settling down to sleep.

While she was still sleeping, a man hidden in the shadows of a black robe had appeared before her. He had used a combination of dark magic to brainwash her and erode her mind little by little.

Of course most people would have been woken up by such an assault. However, this is where the dragonmen's bad habit worked to the man's advantage. As More had mentioned before when he was explaining the proverb, dragonmen were notoriously hard to wake in their dragon forms. Only a good kick to the arse could rouse them from their slumber. That being said, dragonmen were also known for their immense willpower, and a dragonman of her caliber wouldn't have been easy to control.

The reason that man had been able to take over her mind so perfectly was because...

"He was a truly terrifying human. His proficiency with dark magic was so great that I daresay he must have been some kind of genius. And he had had nearly a whole day to work his magic on me. I may be fearsome, but even I cannot withstand such an attack..." She trailed off sadly, as if that had been the greatest blunder of her life. Unfortunately for her, Hajime was merciless with his words.

"So what you're telling me is that you were in such a deep sleep that you didn't even notice when someone was hovering over you casting magic on you for an entire day?" Everyone looked at her like she was an idiot. However the dragon only stared off in the distance and continued as if he'd said nothing.

She did, it seemed, have some semblance of an excuse. Flying across the sea had been an exhausting ordeal, but her mission required speed. So when she had stopped for a rest, she'd placed herself in a deeper slumber than normal. Either way, it was obviously her mistake that led to this situation, though she didn't admit it.

The reason she knew this mysterious sorcerer had spent an entire day taking her over was because even under his mind control, her original personality and memories had remained. They had just been locked inside her. And it seemed her ears had picked up someone muttering "I can't believe this took a whole day..." after she'd awoken.

After that, she'd been forced to do the robed man's bidding, and

had assisted him in bringing the monsters on the second mountain range under his control. Then one day the herd of Bulltaurs he'd sent over to the first mountain range had been spotted by Will's party, and they had been ordered to eliminate all witnesses. The robed man was worried survivors might report their appearance, which, while unlikely, could have led people to guess there was someone in the mountains controlling monsters. In order to make doubly sure everyone was annihilated, he'd sent the dragon over as well.

Then, right as she'd found Will, she'd been attacked by an unknown entity who'd beat the living shit out of her. Fearing for her life, she'd started to panic. Which is what had caused the earlier mana explosion.

The rest everyone knew. She'd then attempted one last suicide rush at Will, as per her orders, when Shea's skull-shattering blow had landed on her, followed by an extremely painful object shoved into her ass. The combined shock of it had blown away the mind control, returning her to her senses.

She wasn't exactly sure if it was the head blow or the butt-spike that had done the job though.

"...Are you fucking kidding me." Once the dragon finished her explanation, a low, trembling voice echoed through the silence. Everyone turned around in surprise. There was a murderous rage in Will's gaze as he glared at the dragon, his hands balled up into fists.

"...Are you saying it's not your fault because you were controlled... that it's not your fault you killed Gale-san, Navare-san, Lent-san, Wisry-san and Kurt-san!?" The anger he'd felt at the death of his comrades had continually been building up underneath the mountain of panic that had occupied his thoughts until now. Finally, it had boiled over in a violent outburst of shouting.

"....." The black dragon didn't reply. She stared quietly into Will's eyes, absorbing his pain and anger. That calm attitude only served to enrage Will further.

"Besides, who's to say you're even telling the truth! For all we know this is all bullshit you made up so we spare your life!"

"...Everything I told you just now is the truth. I swear it on my pride as a dragonman."

Will opened his mouth to protest again. But he was cut off by Yue.

"...She's not lying."

“What proof do you have that...”

One look from Yue silenced Will. After he trailed off Yue returned her gaze to the black dragon and continued.

“Dragonmen are known for their integrity and loyalty. I’ve lived far longer than any of you. And when I was around, stories of dragonmen were far more common. She staked her pride as a dragonman on her story. It’s no lie. Besides... I know what a liar’s eyes look like, and she’s no liar.”

Yue gazed off into the distance as she said that last part. *She must be thinking about what happened to her three hundred years ago.*

There was no doubt her life before meeting Hajime had been full of lies and deceit. Even the people she thought closest to her had turned out to be liars.

And it was because she’d averted her eyes from that truth that she’d been betrayed. Her somewhat unique life experiences had made her very sensitive to lies and liars. And her conclusion was that the dragon before them was no liar.

“Oh, I did not expect to see those who still knew of us in this day and age... Wait, how long did you say you’ve lived?” Thinking that there were still people alive that told stories of her people’s race, the dragon spoke in a pleasantly surprised voice.

“...Long. I am a survivor of the vampire race. Three hundred years ago, our monarchs looked to the dragonmen as models of how to live, as well as how to rule.”

In other words, to Yue the dragonmen were symbols of righteousness. At the very least, she spoke of them with respect. That had played no small part in her decision to stop Will’s tirade.

When she heard about Yue’s heritage, the dragon was even more surprised.

“Unbelievable! A vampire... and three hundred years old at that... I see. Our sources from the outside world had told us the vampires had been wiped out, but I see their princess still yet lives. I believe your name was...” It seemed this dragon had lived at least as long as Yue, if not more. But the way she spoke about events, it seemed that while she kept a distance from the affairs of the world, she wasn’t ignorant of them. The dragonmen must send people out to mingle with other humans and gather news relatively often. Which is why she was surprised when she’d heard the vampires’ princess had survived. Needless to say, Aiko and Yuka and the others were even more shocked. Their jaws were hanging open.

Yue headed the dragon off before she could speak Yue's original name.

"Yue... that's my name. The person I treasure most in this world gave it to me. Please use that." She was blushing slightly, and holding her hands close to her chest, like she was cupping something dear.

Sparkling waves of happiness were radiating off her. When they saw her expression, the girls all looked like they'd spotted a buffet of sweets, while the guys blushed, captivated by her words. Even Will's anger dimmed slightly.

But then he thought back to the kind adventurers who'd taught him so much, and he found his rage again.

"...Even so, it doesn't change the fact that you killed them... Even if it was against your will... you still did it! Gale-san said he was going to propose once this mission was over! Just what did they die for..." He understood logically that the dragon wasn't to blame. But he couldn't help himself. Even if he understood it in his head, he couldn't accept it in his heart. He ground his teeth together as a dark fog of anger enveloped his thoughts.

That's a lot of flags he just raised. While appreciating the cliched nature of Will's speech, Hajime suddenly remembered the locket he'd picked up.

"Will, did this belong to that Gale guy?" He pulled it out and threw it over to Will. Will caught it and opened it up. As he stared at the picture inside, his mouth turned up into a smile.

"This is my locket! I thought I'd lost it forever. I can't believe you found it. Thank you so much!"

"Oh that's yours?"

"Yes! There's no mistaking it, the portrait inside is of my mother!"

"Y-Your mother?" Hajime stuttered, surprised at how far off the mark his guess had been.

When he asked Will why she looked like she was in her early twenties, he got a completely unexpected response.

"If I was going to carry around a portrait of my mother, it makes sense to have one of her in her younger days, right?" Everyone present realized he must have had a huge Oedipus complex. The girls all backed a few steps away from him. As an aside, Gale's lover had been a guy. His full name was Gale Gaye. It was often said that a person's name described who they were.

Will had calmed down a great deal after discovering his locket wasn't lost forever. Though it was hard to ascertain whether or not that had actually helped. Even if he had calmed down, that didn't mean his resentment had faded. And even after regaining his composure, he still insisted that the black dragon be killed. His reasoning was that there was no telling when she might get brainwashed again, but everyone knew it was just an excuse. What he really wanted was revenge.

It was then that the dragon, in a voice full of remorse, proposed a solution.

"Whether it was by my will or not, the truth is that I stole the lives of many innocent people. If you say I must die for my crimes, then I shall accept that punishment. However, could you not give me some time? Before I die, I must at least destroy that dangerous man. That man is trying to create an army of monsters. The dragonmen have always kept their distance from the affairs of the continent, however after what he did, it is my responsibility to stop him. I cannot allow him to run free... I understand what I am asking of you is selfish. But will you please grant me the opportunity to stop this tragedy before it gets any worse?" Everyone's expressions changed when they heard the words "army of monsters." They all looked to Hajime. At some point, he had become the effective leader of their group. The one who'd fought the dragon off had been him, so it seemed natural to entrust the decision to him as well.

His response was as casual and swift as always.

"I really don't give a damn about your responsibilities. You caused us quite a bit of trouble. So for that you'll have to die."

He raised his artificial arm and made a fist.

"Please wait! Y-You cannot seriously mean to kill me now, not after all I just said! I'm begging you, please let me go. Once I settle my affairs I'll let you do whatever you want with me! So please! Think of the future generations that might yet be saved!"

Hajime ignored her and brought his fist down. But it never reached its intended target. Before he could pound the spike further in, Yue hugged him from behind. She lifted her face to his ear and muttered some words in a hushed tone.

"...Are you really going to kill her?"

"Hm? I mean yeah, we were pretty much fighting to the death a second ago..."

"...But she's not an enemy. She never once directed animosity toward you. She was being controlled."

Yue didn't want to let the dragon die. As she had growing up respecting the dragonmen race, letting Hajime kill her would leave a bad taste in Yue's mouth.

And while the battle had eventually devolved into the death match, technically speaking she had initially been after Will. And now they even knew the reason why. She had been robbed of her will, and forced to carry out her controller's orders like a machine. In the first place, the only reason it had devolved into a death match despite how focused she'd been on Will was because of Hajime.

True, keeping Will alive was Hajime's current mission, so by making Will her enemy she had made Hajime her enemy, but the truth was that Hajime's real enemy was the man behind the dragon. If anyone should become the target of his ire, it would be him.

There was one other reason Yue had stopped Hajime.

Yue understood very well Hajime's worldview. But she couldn't see the dragon before her in the same light as the enemies they'd killed before. After everything she'd experienced as the vampires' monarch, Yue had a good eye for people. And Yue could tell that the dragon truly had no intention of becoming Hajime's enemy. Yue didn't want Hajime to kill anyone that wasn't truly his enemy. As for why, that was because...

"...If you compromise your own rules, you'll start losing your humanity. Is killing her something you really have to do?" She was worried Hajime would start to break down if he actually killed someone who wasn't truly his enemy.

Sensing Yue's worries, Hajime cocked his head and thought about whether that black dragon really was his enemy. Hajime wasn't so naive as to worry about whether his opponent was being controlled or not in the middle of a fight. He would kill anything standing in his way.

But was there any reason to execute a former foe who had since been freed from her mind control? Was that still killing an "enemy"? Hajime stared into Yue's eyes, inches away from his own. As he considered his own principles, a strained voice interrupted them.

"Sorry to interrupt your flirting, but if you're still debating, could you please remove this spike from my behind? At this rate I'll

die soon regardless of what you do."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Any foreign objects inserted inside me in my dragon form remain the same way when I revert to human form. Just imagine a woman with a spike this hard and large inside her... Do you think she could survive?"

Everyone grimaced as they imagined the sight. Yuka and the other girls unconsciously covered their butts sympathetically.

"I am maintaining this form with my mana, but that will soon run dry. I can last maybe another minute like this... I am interested in seeing what lies beyond death, but dying like this would be too unsightly to bear. Think of the future generations that might be saved!" While that last bit seemed rather out of place, her voice was very clearly strained. Hajime didn't have much time to make his choice.

"...Fine." With one hand wrapped around Yue, he decided that if he was hesitating this much already, it couldn't hurt to listen to his partner's advice. People often didn't understand themselves very well. In which case, it made sense to do what would put the person he trusted most at ease.

With his free hand, Hajime grabbed the massive spike stuck in the dragon's butt. Then he pulled with all his strength.

"Haaaahn! S-Slower please. I am still unaccustomed to such— Afwuu. Yaah, so rough! This— Aaaahn! Something— something strange is coming!" The spike had been driven pretty far up her asshole. So Hajime had to wiggle it around a bit and pull pretty hard to get it out. For some strange reason, the rougher he got, the happier the dragon's moans sounded. Hajime ignored her completely and continued pulling until finally it came free.

"Ahiiiiiiiiiiii...! A-Amazing. I asked you to be gentle, and yet you showed not even an iota of mercy... This is the first time I've ever..." A few seconds after her incoherent rambling, the dragon's body was wrapped in a cocoon of mana and gradually started to shrink. When she'd shrunk to about human size, the cocoon of mana dissipated.

What emerged from the cocoon of black mana was a beautiful woman. She had black hair and piercing golden eyes. She was sitting on her knees, supporting her body with one hand and rubbing her butt with the other. Her luxurious, thick hair fell straight down to her waist, and her disheveled bangs were stuck her

blushing face. She was panting heavily, and her expression was ecstatic. Anyone would find her current appearance seductive.

She had the figure of a woman in her early twenties. Though her height was easily over 170 centimeters. She was very well endowed, and every time her shoulders heaved, her twin mounds threatened to spill out of her clothes. If Shea's were melon sized, then this girl's were watermelon sized.

"I can't believe it... This is amazing."

"S-So this is what a fantasy world is like."

"Dammit! I know you've got some juice left in you! Come on, phone!"

The dragon's beautiful appearance had a huge impact on Atsushi and the guys. The three of them were in the height of their puberty, so it was only natural. They all stooped over and spouted ridiculous lines. If this continued for any longer, they would be forced on all fours to hide their boners. Yuka and the others were staring at the guys like they were cockroaches.

"Haah... Haah... Thank you for sparing my life... My butt still feels weird... but it's nothing compared to how much the rest of my body aches... Haah... Haah... to think pain could feel so sweet..." Both her expression and her words were rather ominous, or so Hajime thought. After a few minutes, she composed herself enough to sit up straight, and introduce herself calmly. Though her intermittent panting ruined the stately effect her sharp posture and crisp tone created.

"I have caused you all much grief. Please understand that I truly, truly am sorry for what I have done. My name is Tio Klarus. I'm a dragonman of the Klarus clan."

Tio then went on to explain how the robed figure who was gathering a monster army was planning on attacking the nearby villages. And that he had already gathered a mob of three to four thousand monsters. Most of the monsters that inhabited the second mountain range lived in packs, so all he'd needed to do was subjugate their respective leaders, and the packs had followed.

The whole reason Hajime and the other students had been summoned to this world was because the Holy Church had feared the demons had somehow discovered a way to control monsters, so because of that, Aiko and the others surmised he must have been a member of the demon race.

However, when they said as much Tio shook her head, Tio

explained that the black-robed man had been a black-haired, black-eyed human, and that while she'd called him a man, he was young enough to be considered a kid. She also distinctly remembered what he had said after taking control of her mind. Elated by his success, he had yelled, "This proves I'm better than him. I'm the real hero here!" He had seemingly harbored a massive grudge against this hero person.

A black-haired, black-eyed boy who knew the hero well and was a genius at using dark magic.

There was one person who perfectly fit all of those conditions. Aiko muttered "But that can't be..." and she and the other students all exchanged troubled glances. As obvious as it was, they didn't want to believe it.

As they were worrying about what to do, Hajime, who had been using his Far Sight skill, suddenly realized something.

"Oh, so that's..." When he'd heard Tio's story he'd sent his Ornises out to search for the monster army and the black-robed man. One of them had spotted a large gathering of monsters, but... the numbers were off.

"You said three to four thousand right? Are you sure you weren't a digit short?" Everyone's eyes flew open in surprise. It appeared he'd begun his advance. The robed man was almost certainly aiming for the town of Ur. If they continued at their current pace they would be down the mountain in half a day, and reach the town in another half.

"W-We need to hurry back and warn everyone! Then we need to evacuate and ask for reinforcements from the capital... And then, and then..."

Realizing the seriousness of the situation, Aiko tried to think through her panic and figure out the best course of action. Against an army in the tens of thousands, even the ridiculously overpowered students didn't stand a chance. Besides, they still hadn't fully recovered from their trauma.

Aiko had basically no combat ability, Will was barely even an adventurer, and Tio was completely drained of mana. Forget stopping them, they wouldn't even be able to slow the army down. Thus, Aiko's plan of warning and everyone and running until reinforcements from the capital came was the best considering the circumstances.

However, while everyone else was panicking, Will quietly asked

a rather odd question.

"Umm, Hajime-dono, couldn't you do something about..." At his words, everyone looked expectantly to Hajime. Their eyes were filled with hope. Annoyed by their expectant gazes, Hajime casually waved his hand as if to dismiss the thought.

"Don't look at me like that. My job is to bring Will safely back to Fuhren. I can't fight a war if I've got to protect him. Hurry up and go warn the villagers." Atsushi and Will were angry at how casually Hajime dismissed them. However, Aiko's concern was elsewhere.

"Nagumo-kun, did you happen to see the black-robed man too?"

"Hm? Nope. I've been checking regularly, but all I'm seeing is a horde of monsters."

Aiko hung her head sadly. After a moment of deliberation, she stated that she wanted to confirm whether or not the black-robed man was really Yukitoshi Shimizu, the missing boy they'd been searching for. As always, she put her students first. If the cause of all this trouble really was one of her students, then it was her responsibility.

However, there was no way they could leave Aiko alone among an army of monsters, and so Yuka and the others desperately tried to talk her out of it. Aiko hesitated for a bit, but then came up with another idea... namely that Hajime could accompany her. Tired of their constant arguing over whether to stay or leave, Hajime gave Aiko a cold stare.

"If you want to stay behind you can. We're going to take Will back to the village." With that, Hajime forcefully grabbed Will by the shoulders and started dragging him down the mountain. Will and Aiko tried to protest, saying they couldn't leave this huge army alone, that they needed to confirm who the black-robed man was, that Hajime was strong enough to take on the whole army, and so on. Annoyed, Hajime let out a sigh and rounded on Aiko.

"Like I said before, my only job is to see Will to safety. I can't fight an army if I've got someone I need to protect. Hell, let's say for argument's sake that I could kill them all. In a forested place like this full of boulders and rivers, there's no way I could be sure I'd gotten every single one. Just give it a rest, okay. Even if we find out whether or not the kid really is a student, who'll be left to warn the town? On the off chance that they're actually stronger than us, we'll

be wiped out and the town will be caught totally by surprise. Just so you know, only I can drive Steiff and Brise, so if I go fight, you guys have no chance of making it back before the town's attacked." Aiko and Will fell silent. Hajime's argument had made it clear how pointless and reckless their insistence that he go fight was.

"Well, my mast... Ahem, he has point. My mana is completely drained right now too. I understand your desire to act, but right now there's nothing we can do. Our first priority should be warning the villagers. After a day my mana will be mostly recovered as well." Tio followed up after Hajime, supporting his reasoning.

Was she about to call me what I think she was about to call me...? It can't be, can it?

Realizing that was the best option in their current situation, Aiko reined in her worry and prioritized warning the town and the safety of the students still under her charge.

Tio was so drained of mana that she couldn't move, so Hajime grabbed her by the scruff of the neck and dragged her down the mountain.

Atsushi and the other boys had been ready to fight each other for the right to carry Tio, but Yuka had quickly shut them down, and it seemed Tio herself wished to be carried by Hajime, which was why he'd ended up with the job.

But of course, Hajime wasn't the kind of person to carry her nicely. Frowning in annoyance, he had grabbed by the legs and dragged her at first.

However, Aiko's fierce protests had talked him into at least dragging her by the scruff of her neck. No matter what anyone said after that he refused to compromise any further. Tio herself had a look of ecstasy on her face too, which made everyone back away, thus resulting in this being the style she was dragged down the mountain in.

The party hurried to Ur as fast as they could, an army of monsters not far behind them.

Chapter III: The Sack of Ur

“Hii!” A high pitched shriek echoed throughout a corner of a tunnel dimly lit by green glowstone, somewhere in the depths of the Great Orcus Labyrinth.

“What’s wrong, Shizuku-chan?”

Kaori Shirasaki, a member of the hero’s party, turned to her longtime friend, a puzzled expression on her face. It was uncharacteristic of Shizuku Yaegashi of all people to scream like that.

“U-Umm... it’s nothing. I was just surprised when a drop of water fell on my neck, that’s all.”

“I see. Fufu.”

Shizuku awkwardly averted her gaze. Kaori giggled when she realized her stoic friend had been scared by a mere drop of water.

Though considering monsters could attack them at any time, it didn’t seem so far-fetched to be frightened by a sudden chill running down one’s neck. Especially as the party was now traversing uncharted floors. But Kaori still couldn’t help but find her friend’s embarrassment at her mistake cute.

Thinking there might be some foul play at work, Shizuku snuck a glance back at Kaori. She was walking with a relaxed air, but despite that she still kept a close watch on her surroundings.

Was it just my imagination then? But it’s been happening more and more frequently... Maybe Kaori’s not the one doing things and I’m just tired? But then... Shizuku fell deep into thought.

The cause of her scream had nothing to do with water dropping on her. If that had been enough to startle her, she wouldn’t have made it as the vanguard commander of the hero’s party.

The actual reason was...

“Hya!”

“Shizuku-chan?”

“Shizuku?”

“Shizushizu?”

Shizuku’s scream was louder than before. It wasn’t just Kaori

that noticed this time. Kouki Amanogawa, her childhood friend and the hero of the hero's party noticed, along with their barrier master, Suzu Taniguchi. Kouki's best friend, Ryutarou Sakagami, and Suzu's best friend Eri Nakamura noticed as well, along with Jugo Nagayama, Kentarou Nomura, Ayako Tsuji, Mao Yoshino, Kousuke Endou, Daisuke Hiyama, Yoshiki Saitou, Reichi Kondou, and Shinji Nakano. Nagayama and Hiyama were both leaders of their respective units, and the entire party came to a halt as they stared at Shizuku.

Still shaken by what she'd just seen, Shizuku spoke in a faltering voice.

"Th-There was a demon mask. R-Right there, a demon mask, no a demon mask-san was floating in the air." The others grew even more puzzled as Shizuku added "-san" to the demon mask. They each took out their artifacts and cautiously swept their surroundings.

"Shizuku...where did you see it? That demon mask-like monster?" Kouki asked and began pouring mana into his sword, causing it to glow pure white. Even using his Sense Presence skill he couldn't sense any monsters nearby. Cold sweat poured down his forehead as he considered the possibility that they might be facing monsters skilled enough in stealth to evade his Sense Presence.

However Shizuku didn't sense Kouki's nervousness, and instead shot another suspicious glance at Kaori.

"...Ummm I saw it floating behind Kaori..."

"Huh!? Me!? No way, where!? Where is it!?"

Kaori began to panic. She circled in place with her head turned back, like a dog chasing its own tail, looking for the mask Shizuku'd seen. Her cleric's robes fluttered around her, giving off the illusion that she was dancing.

Kaori's adorable antics combined with Shizuku's apologetic expression served to drain the tension from Kouki's body.

"Sorry. I think I'm just seeing things."

"Well, we are deep inside a dark dungeon. Don't worry about it Shizuku. I'd rather you say something every time you think you see something than miss noticing an ambush. Meld-san said the same thing, remember?"

Kouki reassuringly patted Shizuku on the shoulder, and the other party members all nodded in agreement.

They had been making steady progress, and were now on the

seventy-eighth floor. The reliable commander of the knight corps, Meld Loggins, was nowhere to be seen. Him, along with a retinue of handpicked elites were waiting on standby at the seventieth floor. They'd discovered a teleportation circle that went from there to the thirtieth floor. This was the first shortcut they'd ever discovered in this labyrinth, so Meld and his knights were making sure to guard it to guarantee safe passage through.

While Meld and his knights were the strongest the kingdom had to offer, they had been forced to retire around the seventieth floor. Even though their skills had grown as they'd continued exploring, the monsters they faced in the latter half of the seventies had proven too strong for the knights to handle, and they'd left the students to progress on their own.

Before they 'd set off on their own, Meld had repeated to them over and over all of the tips and tricks he'd learned about dungeon delving, to the point where Kouki and the others had gotten tired of his nagging.

At some point he'd started sounding less like a knight and more like their mother, saying things like "Do you all have handkerchiefs? Make sure you don't scavenge for food in the dungeon okay? If you eat anything strange make sure to spit it out at once," and so on. At some point they'd stopped being tricks about dungeon delving, and just plain fussing, as he said things like "Are you sure your equipment's good enough?" The Kingdom's treasure, the holy sword, had no longer been good enough for Meld, who was overcome with worry.

"These are the best treasures your kingdom has to offer!" Kouki and the others had retorted.

But in the end, it looked like this incident really had just been Shizuku seeing things.

"I guess even you get spooked sometimes, huh Shizuku?"

"I never thought I'd hear Shizuku say 'demon mask-san'... This is truly a day to remember."

"Suzu, please stop snickering like that..."

The party resumed their search. Kouki took the lead, with Shizuku and Kaori following behind. Shizuku continued sneaking glances at Kaori as they walked.

"H-Hey, Kaori."

"What is it, Shizuku-chan?"

"Are you okay?"

“?”

Kaori tilted her head in confusion, not understanding what Shizuku meant. However, a second later, her face went pale and she asked Shizuku a question in a shaky voice.

“S-Shizuku-chan. Don’t tell me that thing is still behind me? Shizuku-chan, how long has it been there!? Have I been cursed!?”

“N-No it’s not that! I don’t see anything, don’t worry!”

“R-Really?”

Kaori continued glancing over her shoulder making sure nothing was there. It was just like when walking home alone one felt like there was someone behind them, and looked back only to see no one. Even knowing there’s no one following them, they still become paranoid. Kaori was terrible with scary things like ghosts and demons, so she was doubly scared of the “demon mask-san” Shizuku had seen.

However when she glanced back for the hundredth time, Kaori actually did spot a black shadow out of the corner of her eye.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah it’s the demon mask-saaaaaaaaaan!”

“Wait, wha— Hebagfh!?”

Kaori let out a shrill scream, closed her eyes, and started wildly swinging her staff around. A second later she felt a thud as it hit something, and one of the male students screamed.

“Kousuke!”

“So that’s where you were hiding!?”

“Endou-kun just went flying.”

“Wow he really got some air time there!”

The person Kaori had mistaken as a demon mask-san had actually been Kousuke Endou, a member of Nagayama’s party and the world’s most inconspicuous person. He had such a weak presence that before they’d been whisked away to Tortus, even automatic doors in Japan had ignored him.

His job, quite aptly, was Assassin.

He’d been friends with Jugo and Kentarou for ages, but even they’d go “Wait, where’d Kousuke go?” “The bathroom, maybe?” “But he was right here...” almost every day, even when he was standing right next to them. Even before he’d been summoned his invisibility had practically been a super power, but after coming to Tortus, he’d honed his stealth skills even further.

So much so that, despite the fact that he’d been right behind

Kaori, directly in her line of sight every time she turned back, she hadn't even noticed him.

Seeing her tearful expression every time she turned back had been bad for his heart. His heartbeat accelerated to dangerous levels, and he decided for the safety of his health that he should move somewhere else. But just as he'd begun to do so Kaori had turned back, catching a glimpse of him out of the corner of her eye... resulting in him getting smacked.

Which was bad for his health in a different sense.

"Huh!? Endou-kun!? Awawa, I'm so sorry!" It seemed the true identity of the demon mask-san had been Endou. The force of Kaori's blow had sent him sprawling, and he was sitting on his knees, dazed. Embarrassed, she walked up to him and cast a healing spell. He looked off into the distance as Kaori's light purple mana enveloped him. He looked truly pitiable.

Kaori apologized over and over, bowing her head as low as it could go, before Kousuke finally responded.

"It's fine, really. I'm used to it... And besides, Hiyama's starting to give me scary looks." That only served to make him look more pitiable, and Jugo came over to comfort him. Finally the party's best scout was fit for duty once more, and they resumed exploring the seventy-eighth floor.

"I'm sorry for scaring you, Kaori."

"It's fine. I was the one that overreacted. Don't worry about it."

Shizuku apologized, as it was her initial scream that had been the cause of all this. She let out a sigh of relief when Kaori forgave her. Then, thinking back on everything she'd seen recently, she expanded on her previous question.

"Anyway, Kaori, are you sure you're okay? You've been feeling kind of different recently. You keep brooding over something... and sometimes it feels like you're not all there, like you're staring at something far off in the distance... or am I just imagining things?"

"Huh? Really? I don't feel like I'm any different, though..."

"I see..."

Is it really just my imagination then? Shizuku tilted her head in confusion, but if Kaori was insisting she was fine, Shizuku told herself there was no reason to doubt her. But before she could say as much, Kaori suddenly remembered something and dropped her fist in her palm.

"Ah, but I do feel weird sometimes."

“Weird how?”

“Hmm. I’m not really sure how to explain it, but…”

She tilted her head and looked around for a moment… then her face suddenly went blank. Her face was utterly devoid of expression, like she’d just turned into a robot of some kind.

“It’s kind of like someone just stole something important to me… you know?”

“K-Kaori? Umm Kaori-san?”

“Fufufu, funny isn’t it? Fufufu.”

“Kaori! I’m sorry! I won’t ask you weird stuff anymore so come back to us, please!”

Even though she was laughing, her expression remained blank, and even her laughter sounded monotone. *Happening, cannot be!* Shizuku was so shocked her thoughts became an incomprehensible jumble, and she tried to bring Kaori back to her normal self.

She had no way of knowing the cause of her best friend’s strange actions was due to a white-haired boy with an eyepatch flirting with a vampire princess thousands of miles away, and could only lightly slap Kaori’s cheeks.

“Hey Shizuku-chan, why are you slapping my cheek? Cut it out.”

“You’ve finally come back to us, Kaori. Thank goodness.”

The spell passed as quickly as it had come, and Shizuku sighed in relief as Kaori returned to normal. Shizuku couldn’t tell how or why, but it seemed like Kaori was reacting to some unpleasant events happening far away. She couldn’t tell how she knew that either, but she was worried Kaori was gradually slipping closer to the dark side.

This was a different world. If magic and monsters and even gods could exist, there was no reason strange psychic powers couldn’t... Probably. Shizuku tried to convince herself that was the case. Even if she didn’t fully understand the reason, her job was to make sure she brought Kaori back to her senses every time before she turned into Black Kaori for good.

As Shizuku was making that resolution, Kouki suddenly stopped a few paces ahead.

“Be on your guard, everyone. There’s something up ahead. I can sense it. There’s only one though.”

“Do you want me to go ahead and scout?”

“There’s only one of ’em right? Then we don’t need to bother scouting. Let’s just rush in and slaughter it.”

Normally whenever they encountered enemies that had yet to spot them they would send Kousuke out ahead to assess the monsters’ abilities. Hence why Kousuke offered to go preemptively, but Ryutarou smacked his fists together and suggested they fight instead.

When they ran into small groups or lone monsters the party often decided to fight without bothering to scout ahead. Which is why Kouki decided to adopt Ryutarou’s plan this time, and advance.

They continued through the dim corridor for a few seconds longer before spotting...

“Is that... a person?” Kouki muttered in surprise, and everyone else’s eyes went round as they saw what lay up ahead. The figure up ahead certainly looked human. Though it looked the lower half of their body had been trapped inside the wall. Long bangs covered their face, making it impossible to make out their features or whether they were even alive or dead. However their small frame

suggested they were a girl.

"O-Oh no. We've got to help them!"

"Wait up, Kouki!"

Thinking it might be an adventurer that had been kidnapped by monsters, or caught in some trap that had teleported them further below, Kouki hurried over. Shizuku tried to stop him, but Kouki's high stats made him too fast.

"Are you alright!?" Kouki yelled as he reached a hand out to them. A second later, Kouki's feet sank into the ground. He just barely managed to keep his balance and avoid faceplanting. When he looked down he saw that the ground, which had been hard seconds ago, had turned into a murky quagmire, and was slowly sucking his legs into the floor. The mud in front of Kouki rose up and formed the rough shape of a human. It was a mud doll in the shape of a person... In other words, a Clay Golem. More Clay Golems rose up around Kouki, who was struggling to break free. They molded their arms into scythe shapes and swing them down at him.

"Kuh!" Kouki quickly wrapped his sword in mana and swung it around in a circle. When his right arm could stretch no further he quickly swapped his sword to his left and continued the arc. This was one of the Yaegashi-style techniques he'd learned at her dojo, Pale Moon. However halfway through the circle, he stumbled.

"S-Shizuku!?" The reason he'd messed up despite practicing this swing hundreds of times was because the golem in front of him had Shizuku's face. More precisely, it had molded its face to look like Shizuku's. As the rest of its body was still that of a golem it only took a single glance to realize his opponent wasn't Shizuku. But seeing his childhood friend suddenly appear in the path of his swing was enough to break his concentration for a split second. In a way, it was only natural for him to hesitate a little.

But natural or not, that hesitation would have proven fatal, under normal circumstances that is.

"Hah!"

"Divine Shackles!"

The golems on Kouki's right were cut down by a slash faster than light, while the ones on his left were shackled by chains of purple light. The golems quickly tried to dissolve back into mud to free themselves, but they were sliced in half by another sword slash. This was the next level of the technique Kouki had used, Rippling

Pale Moon. The one who had cut them down was of course Shizuku.

"Are you alright, Kouki?"

"I'm fine. Sorry, and thanks!"

Kaori used her Divine Shackles to lift Kouki out the quagmire. More golems started sprouting up, surrounding not just Kouki's party, but Hiyama and Nagayama's units as well. They were using their face-morphing abilities and sharp scythes to press the students back.

"Damn it, there's no end to them! How're we supposed to beat these things!?"

"Even if we cut one down, it just reforms!"

Ryutarou blasted one of them away with a well-placed thrust, but it just dissolved into a pile of mud and reformed. The other students weren't faring any better.

Kouki was running around assisting whoever was in trouble, but that was only a temporary measure. As he was pondering how to break out of this deadlock, he spotted Shizuku coming toward him. This time he was sure it wasn't a golem. She looked like Shizuku from the neck down as well. Hoping to avail himself of Shizuku's wisdom, he started wading his way through the golems toward her as well.

But as he drew closer, he noticed something. The person that had originally been trapped in the wall was no longer there. They should have been directly behind Shizuku. He suddenly felt shivers run down his spine. Where was she? He hurriedly glanced around the area.

"Shizuku, watch out! Whoever was trapped in the wall isn't there anymore! They might be hiding—"

"Idiot, they're right in front of you!"

Someone suddenly grabbed him by the back of his neck and threw him back. A gust of wind whooshed past his face an instant later. Coughing, he looked up. Standing in front of him was something that looked exactly like Shizuku, but had a longsword for a right arm. A few of Kouki's hairs fell to the ground. He'd just barely avoided being decapitated.

"Looks like that thing's their boss. It looks like it can mimic people's body types and even clothes." Kouki heard Shizuku's calm voice directly behind him. Looking back, he saw the exact same Shizuku, except this one had a normal right arm. As Shizuku had said, the golem that had come from the wall seemed to be their

leader.

The Grey Golem boss morphed its left arm into a sword as well and charged.

"I won't fall for that a third time!"

The two swords came slashing down at him in a winding arc, almost like they were whips. He parried one with his sword and dodged the other. He tried to close the distance between them, but the golem summoned scythes made of mud and flung them at him. The barrage of scythes kept coming, forcing Kouki back. No matter how many of them he cut down, the golem just created more.

The only saving grace is that they were all made of mud, so while the scythes were deadly, they were easily ripped apart. So even weak swings could take them out, as long as they landed. But as their surroundings were filled with mud, the golems had a near infinite amount of resources to work with. Hence why Kouki had his hands full just defending against the boss golem's onslaught. The other students were all being hard pressed by the golems as well.

Just around the time Kouki was debating using his Limit Break skill to blow them all away at once, someone jumped behind the boss golem. Kouki's lips curled up into a grin.

I knew you could do it Shizuku! I'm counting on you! Roger. They had a short conversation with a single exchange of glances. Shizuku had used her vaunted speed to circle behind the golem. She cut down the golems guarding the boss golem with a single swing of her sword, her signature ponytail swinging from side to side. She resheathed her sword and leaped toward the boss golem with frightening speed.

In an instant, the golem changed its appearance. Into that of Kaori.

"Ah." Shizuku let out a silent gasp. The thing in front of her was a monster. She understood that. At least in her head. But she wasn't mature enough to be able to accept that wholly right away. And a person's instincts always acted faster than their thoughts. To kill the golem, she would have to slice her best friend's face in two.

"Aaaaaaaah!"

Kouki couldn't tell if that was a scream of anguish, or one to psych herself up. Either way, it was thanks to that that she managed to overcome her hesitation and let loose her fastest slash, the Yaegashi-style technique, Rising Dragon. Normally the attack was

followed up by a jump kick and a finisher with the sheath, but the continuation was unnecessary in this case.

A crack formed at the golem's base and quickly traveled up, just like a rising dragon. A second later there was a snapping noise, and the golem was cleaved cleanly in two, along with the mana stone inside of it. The golem collapsed in a puddle of mud, the two halves of its mana stone falling into its remains with a plop. At the same time, the other golems all crumbled as well.

"Great job, Shizuku!" Kouki let out an elated whoop as he ran toward Shizuku. Shizuku grinned and responded in a rather happy, exited tone, then Kouki turned around to congratulate Ryutarou and the others, while Shizuku looked down at her palms. Some of the mud from the Clay Golem was smeared on them. She furrowed her brows and quickly wiped it off. However, even after her hands were clean, Shizuku's expression was still grim.

"Shizuku."

"Huh?"

Kouki's voice brought Shizuku out of her musings. She gave a distracted reply; her every instinct was screaming to her that death was approaching from behind. She turned around, then saw a massive spider dangling from the ceiling. Its eight red eyes were fixated on her, and some poisonous-looking fluid was dripping from its clawed legs, which stood ready to pounce.

Someone let out a gasp. This was the price they paid for letting their guards down for even a second. That was the harsh reality of the labyrinth. Those who braved its depths walked hand in hand with death. And more often than not, death would have its due. That was just the kind of place they were in.

"Binding Blades of Light!"

Luckily for the students, death had already had its fill for the day. Before its envenomed claws could sink into Shizuku's flesh, crosses of amethyst light speared the spider's body, blowing it back toward the wall and pinning it in place. As it was a binding spell and not an offensive one, the spider didn't actually take that much damage, but the impact of being slammed against the wall still confused it for an instant.

Shizuku had avoided death's embrace by a hair's breadth, saved by her best friend's magic. Next to Kaori, Suzu had hurriedly started chanting a barrier spell, but stopped mid-cast.

"K-Kaorin, how'd you get so fast..." she said, with a

dumbfounded expression on her face.

"Kaori... thanks. You just saved my—" Before Shizuku could finish thanking her, Kaori started briskly walking toward the spider. For some reason, the phrase "Let sleeping dogs lie" flashed through her mind, and Shizuku fell silent. Even Kouki was a little overwhelmed by Kaori's attitude.

She stopped in front of the spider and raised her staff, summoning her binding chains. Far more than she usually called forth. Chains sprouted from the walls, the floor, and even the ceiling. They wrapped around the spider, ripping it from the wall, leaving it suspended in midair. They then coiled about it over and over, until it was encased in a sphere of glowing chains.

"U-Umm, Kaori?" Shizuku called out nervously. Though the fear of death had since passed, Shizuku could feel goosebumps rising up on her skin.

Kaori started shrinking the ball of chains, causing some disturbing creaking noises to come from the spider before slowly turning around to face Shizuku. Behind her was something that could only be described as a demon. A ghost dressed in pure white, with a horrific mask for a face.

"It's the demon mask-san!" Shizuku finally realized the true nature of the terrifying illusions she'd been seeing. Even Kouki let out a frightened squeal as he took a faltering step back.

"K-Kaori? Umm, Kaori-san? Umm, behind you—"

"Fufu, what's wrong Shizuku-chan? You usually just call me by my first name. Fufufu... How odd. It feels as if some thieving rabbit just stole something really important from me. I wonder why?"

The odd thing here is you! Not that Shizuku could say that out loud, though. The ghost-demon thing behind Kaori had pulled out a massive sword from somewhere and was tapping it on its shoulder threateningly. *Just what kind of curse is she possessed by?* Shizuku cradled her head, despairing over the state of her best friend. She had no way of knowing that thousands of miles away a white-haired boy with an eyepatch was getting kissed to death by a worthless bunny after saving her from drowning.

Kaori finally returned to her senses a few seconds later, by which time the spider was little more than a crushed ball of goop. After making sure she was okay, the party headed further into the labyrinth. As they continued, Shizuku had to deal with Kaori getting possessed multiple times, Kouki going crazy over Kaori's

madness, German-suplexing Ryutarou when he went a little overboard, keeping demon Kaori happy, keeping Suzu in line every time she tried to grope Kaori, and staring down Hiyama when he got full of himself and tried to rush through the rest of the floor.

"This stress is going to drive me bald..." Her worries about her hair faded away into the labyrinth, much like the lives of many hapless adventurers that had come before her. Whether or not a savior would appear to relieve her of her duty of looking after the others and her worries about balding... only God knew.

Hajime drove Brise even faster on the way back than he had on the way there. Because he was going faster than his road smoothening tires could work their magic, Tio, who was tied to the roof, and Atsushi and the guys, who were sitting in the back, were shaken around like rag dolls.

"N-Nagumooo, can't you drive a bit more gently!?"

"I-I'm gonna fallllllllllllllllll!"

"Noboru! I'm coming, don't— Blagh my tongue, I bit my tongue!"

"Haaah... Oh how my wounds ache. Mas... Ahem, more.... Ahem... Please let me inside." Atsushi was clinging on to the back window for dear life, Noboru was half out of the truck as it was, and Akito had managed to bite through his tongue while trying to reel him back in, and was now writhing in pain. Meanwhile, Tio was writhing in ecstasy as each bump dug into her wounds, calling out for help in a monotone that fooled absolutely no one. Had this been his world, Hajime would have been arrested, but it wasn't, so he didn't care.

About halfway to Ur, Hajime spotted Aiko's guardian knights riding hard in his direction. They were all fully armored. Using his Farsight, Hajime was easily able to make out David, who was charging forward with a ferocious expression on his face, and Chase, who was struggling to keep pace with him.

A few minutes later, the knights spotted a giant black object racing toward them. From their perspective, Hajime's truck looked like some kind of monster. They quickly pulled out their weapons and got into formation. Their quick response, even in the face of an unknown threat, showed just how well they had trained.

Hajime honestly wouldn't have minded just driving right through them. Their attacks had no hope of even scratching Brise.

However, he doubted Aiko felt the same, and it would be a problem if Tio or Atsushi and the others got hurt as he drove past, so he opened the truck's sunroof and started shouting and waving his arms wildly to grab their attention.

David was just about to start raining magic down on the truck when he spotted something that looked distinctly human come out of it. He squinted, trying to make out more detail.

Normally, David would have gone through with the attack anyway, but something made him hesitate. His devotion to Aiko had given him some strange sixth sense when it came to detecting her presence. He raised his arm and gave the signal for his men to stand down. His men looked at him suspiciously, but then their eyes opened wide in surprise as the truck grew closer and they heard who was yelling from inside it. David muttered, "Aiko?" an expression of disbelief on his face.

For a second the knights were terrified some horrible monster had eaten Aiko, but then they saw her waving frantically at them, yelling at them.

"David-saaaan, it's me! Please don't attack us!" Joy spread through the knights as they realized Aiko was safe. True, they were still suspicious about the strange black object she was in, but they understood that it wasn't an immediate threat.

David was perhaps a little *too* overjoyed as he spread his arms wide, as if inviting Aiko to jump into them. Following his example, Chase and the other knights also spread their arms.

Hajime stared with disgust as he watched the retinue of knights all stand there in a line, their arms spread to either side, obvious ecstatic expressions on their faces. Aiko had been certain he would stop in front of David and the others, but their attitude annoyed him so much that he instead accelerated as he got close.

The knights stared blankly at the rapidly accelerating truck for a second before hurriedly diving out of the way.

Hajime mercilessly rode Brise past the scattering knights. The knights watched, smiles still frozen on their faces, as the black thing sped away, Aiko's questioning scream faded into the distance.

Then as one they screamed "Aikooooooooo!" like a group of abandoned lovers, and chased after Brise.

"Nagumo-kun, why did you do that!?" Aiko yelled furiously at Hajime.

"There was a good reason not to stop, Sensei. If we'd stopped,

we'd have to explain what happened, which we don't have time for. We have to explain everything once we get to town anyway, so I'd rather not waste time doing it twice."

"W-Well, I-I suppose that's true..." She still wasn't happy about it, but considering how fast Hajime was driving, she had to admit they would have lost a great deal of time stopping for the knights.

Yue, who'd returned to her usual position next to Hajime, leaned in to whisper in his ear.

"...The real reason?"

"Those grinning knights were creeping me out."

"Mmm, agreed."

Incidentally, Tio had been moaning in ecstasy on the roof right behind Aiko during that entire exchange, but both Aiko and the knights had pretended not to see her. Yue had received quite a shock upon learning Tio's true nature. Enough that she'd mumbled "...Is that really a dragonman?" She had already had misgivings when Tio had first transformed back to her human self, but after seeing how Tio got off to pain, her illusions about the dragonmen all being dignified and wise were completely shattered.

Upon reaching Ur the party got out of Brise and headed to the town hall. As Hajime, Yue, and Shea took their time strolling leisurely there, Aiko and the others ran as fast as their legs would carry them. Hajime had been hoping to just drop Aiko and the students off here and drive Will all the way back to Fuhren, but he'd jumped out of the truck before anyone else, so Hajime had reluctantly followed after him.

The main street was bustling with activity. Not only were this town's dishes famous, but there was also a lake nearby. It attracted tourists and immigrants alike. It was hard to believe this town was about to be overrun by a horde of demons in less than a day's time. The party gazed longingly at the rows of food stalls, but they dutifully headed toward the town hall first.

When Aiko broke the news to the city's leaders, there was a huge uproar. The managers of the Ur branch of the adventurers' guild and the local priests began arguing about what to do next. No one couldn't believe what Aiko had told them. No, they just didn't want to believe it. They kept on asking question after question, hoping against hope that maybe the party had just mistaken what they saw.

Had it been anyone else who had told them their town would be destroyed tomorrow, they would have dismissed it as the ravings of a madman. However, it had been one of Ehit's messengers, the woman the townspeople referred to as a fertility goddess who had brought such news. And as the Holy Church had already made it public knowledge that demons might have found a way to control monsters, the story sounded entirely plausible.

While they had been driving back, Aiko and the students had agreed that it was better not to mention Tio's true identity, or that the mastermind behind the monsters was likely Yukitoshi Shimizu. They hadn't mentioned Tio because Tio herself had not wanted knowledge of the dragonmen's survival to become public knowledge and had requested they stay silent, while not mentioning Shimizu was because Aiko didn't want to incriminate one of her students until she was absolutely sure of the truth.

Leaving Aiko's sentimentality aside, dragonmen were not looked fondly upon by the Holy Church. The students really hadn't wanted to deal with the hassle of making the situation even more chaotic, and possibly be branded as heretics, so they'd unilaterally decided to keep quiet.

It was in the midst of this uproar that Hajime entered the town hall looking for Will. He seemed wholly unconcerned by the tumult.

"Hey Will, don't just run off by yourself. Think about the guy that has to protect you. If you're done warning everyone, then it's time to go back to Fuhren." Everyone turned to Hajime in surprise. The town's leaders exclaimed things to the effect of "Who's this kid?" angry at his sudden interruption.

"Wh-What do you mean, Hajime-dono? This is a huge crisis. You can't seriously be suggesting we abandon the town..." Annoyed, Hajime retorted casually,

"What do you mean abandon? No matter what we're going to have to evacuate until reinforcements come. A tourist town like this doesn't even have any walls or anything to mount a defense from... and if we're going to have evacuate anyway, may as well evacuate to Fuhren. I'll just be evacuating you a bit faster than the others."

"B-But... I mean, I suppose... but still, I can't just run away before everyone else does! There has to be something I can do to help. Hajime-dono, please..."

"Please, won't you help too?" is what he wanted to ask, but he trailed off after seeing Hajime's frigid stare.

“How many times do I have to say it before you get it? My job is to deliver you safely to Fuhren. I couldn’t care less about what happens to this town. And I don’t care about your opinions either. If you refuse to come... I’ll just break your arms and legs and drag you back.”

“What...? Y-You...” Will went pale when he realized Hajime was serious. He involuntarily took a few steps back, unable to completely believe it.

To Will, Hajime was practically a hero. He’d easily beaten down the same black dragon that had annihilated Gale and his veteran party in a single attack. Will had assumed that despite his gruff nature, Hajime was still a good person who would have unconditionally helped the villagers in a crisis. That was why he felt betrayed when he heard Hajime speak so coldly.

He staggered backward, and Hajime took a step forward. He was clearly pressing Will for a decision. The tense atmosphere had everyone else frozen in place, but one person stepped in between the two. It was Aiko. She stared right into Hajime’s cold eyes and questioned him.

“Nagumo-kun. Isn’t... Isn’t there something you can do about that monster army? No... I know you can fight them.” Conviction crept into her voice by the end. She was certain he’d be able to save the town if he wanted. The townspeople broke out into another huge uproar at that.

According to Aiko, the army bearing down on them was tens of thousands strong. Plus, it included ridiculously powerful monsters from up to two mountain ranges over. This was already at the level of a full-scale war, so a single person’s effect was miniscule. A single normal person’s, anyway. The only person strong enough to change the tide of battle single-handedly would be the strongest person among those summoned to save the humans... Namely, the hero.

But even they wouldn’t be able to take on an army alone. Without the help of their party and the rest of the human race, they’d be overwhelmed by sheer numbers, so naturally they doubted that this boy, who wasn’t even the hero, could save them all singlehandedly. Even when it was their goddess saying it was possible. In the face of her determined gaze, Hajime waved his hand casually, as if to deny her claims.

“No way, Sensei. That’s impossible. From what I could tell, there was more than 40,000 of them. There’s no way...”

"But when Will-san asked whether or not you could do it back on the mountain, you didn't say no. You said 'In a forested place like this full of boulders and rivers, there's no way I could be sure I'd gotten them all.' That means out in the open on the plains you could definitely wipe them all out. Am I wrong?"

"I'm surprised you remember that." Hajime berated himself for saying something like that when he knew how good Aiko's memory was. *Well, no point worrying about it now.* Hajime averted his gaze, and Aiko pressed her case, urging him to help.

"Nagumo-kun, won't you please help us? At this rate this beautiful town will surely be destroyed. Worse, many people will lose their lives."

"...How unexpected. I always thought you prioritized your students before everyone else. Aren't you even only helping this country with its war because you're hoping it'll let them get home faster? And yet now you want one of your students to fight and possibly die for the sake of some strangers? Even when they don't want to? Isn't that exactly the same thing those war-hungry priests were trying to get us to do?" Hajime's rebuttal silenced Aiko. She bit her lip and furrowed her brows, conflicted over what she should do.

Still, she kept her gaze on Hajime the entire time, as if trying to read something in his expression. After a while shook her head, as if to clear the hesitation, and stared resolutely at Hajime. She had her teacher face on. Back in Japan, any time someone had come to her with a problem, this was always the expression she'd had.

The nearby priests narrowed their eyes when Hajime insulted the Holy Church, but Aiko ignored them, her attention focused solely on Hajime.

"...If there was some way back home, I'd take you all with me in a heartbeat. That hasn't changed even now. But right now, there isn't one... and if there isn't, I'd at least like to do what I can for the people I've met, talked to, laughed with in this world. Isn't it only natural to want to help other people? Of course I'm still your teacher, so if I have to make a choice, then I'll always pick you guys over everyone else, but..." Aiko paused for a moment, then continued more slowly, as if she was deliberately choosing each word.

"I'm sure that something really terrible must have happened for a gentle boy like you to become like this, Nagumo-kun. Where you

were, you surely didn't have the option of worrying about others. Maybe what I have to say will just seem shallow... After all, I wasn't there to help you when you were suffering the most. Still, I'd like you to listen all the same." Hajime silently indicated for Aiko to continue.

"Nagumo-kun, I can understand your strong desire to return home. You probably want to go back more than any of us. But you know, do you plan to live like this when you return too? Ignoring everyone except those close to you? Eliminating anything that gets in your way? Can you really live like that in Japan? And if not, do you really think you can change your mindset the moment you get back?"

"....."

"Nagumo-kun, I understand that you have your own principles, and that you've already decided your path for the future. I won't try to change that, but I also think that no matter which future you choose, it's... too lonely to only live by ignoring everyone aside from those you care about. If you keep going like this, neither you nor the people you cherish will find happiness. If you want to find happiness... you can't lose sight of your kindness or empathy. You have to think of other people, even if it's only a little. Those are valuable qualities you possessed from the start... Please don't throw them away." Each and every one of Aiko's words pierced Hajime to the core. Everyone else also listened quietly.

The students especially felt the weight behind Aiko's words. They hung their heads, ashamed at how selfishly they'd wielded their powers until now. At the same time, they were both happy and somewhat surprised that Aiko had given so much thought to their lives after they finally returned home.

Hajime smiled to himself. Even if they got dumped into another world, no matter the situation, Aiko always put being a teacher before anything else. Even if one of her students had transformed into a completely different person. It was really something to be praised. Considering how nicely Aiko had been treated thus far, it would have been easy for Hajime to just say "You don't know what I've been through!" or "How could you possibly understand!" Like she'd said in the beginning, he had every right to call everything she'd said shallow words from someone who'd never suffered.

And yet he couldn't. She'd said those words from the heart, and to take them lightly would make him the shallow one. Worse, it

would have been an insult to her dedication. Even if everything she said was full of contradictions.

And because she'd never once pushed him to do the "right" thing, her words had that much more weight. Everything she'd said, even if it had ostensibly been to save these townspeople's lives, had still been out of concern for Hajime's future and his happiness.

He glanced over at Yue. She was staring at Aiko with a nostalgic look in her eyes. But when she noticed Hajime's gaze, she quietly turned to look at him. It was clear from her expression that she'd go along with Hajime no matter what he decided. If nothing else, Hajime definitely wanted this girl to be happy. She had been the one who had saved him when he was on the verge of losing his humanity. He had believed his current lifestyle had been the best way to achieve that, but if what Aiko said was true, it would only lead to misfortune. Not only for him, but for Yue as well.

Next to her, he saw Shea looking worriedly at him. She'd brought a much-needed dose of lighthearted levity into his and Yue's lives. No matter how harshly Hajime had treated her she'd chased after him wholeheartedly. Now she was an important part of their family, and it was obvious from how much she doted on her that Yue really treasured her friendship with Shea. Was she not happier because Hajime had begrudgingly let Shea into their party? For Hajime, this world was nothing more than a prison. A cage that kept him from going back to the place he wanted to be. It was for that reason that he had such a hard time doing anything for the people that lived here.

The values he'd forged in the depths of the abyss, the determination he'd tempered to return to his homeland no matter the cost and to destroy anything in his way, weren't something he could change so easily. So, even if he couldn't sympathize with others right away, he could still act. And if those actions brought happiness to those he cared most about... to Yue and Shea, then he'd gladly do anything.

This didn't mean he suddenly agreed with everything Aiko said, but it was still a heartfelt lecture from *his* teacher. He'd have to be a child to reject it all for no other reason than to be contrarian. If he did decide to help, it was possible things would come to a head with the Holy Church much sooner than he would have liked, but surely he could count on his teacher, Aiko, to help with that. After all, she had to take responsibility for what she'd said to him. And

someone who loved her students this much wouldn't refuse.

I knew I'd get found out eventually. It was just a matter of time. I already have a few countermeasures in place, and besides, I promised myself I wouldn't hide who I am just for the convenience of the people in this world... Hell, it might be fun to cut loose and go all out every now and then. After justifying it to himself, Hajime looked up at Aiko again.

"...Sensei, do you promise you'll always be my teacher?" The implied question was whether she'd always be his ally. His question was half-teasing, half-hopeful.

"Of course," she replied without hesitation.

"...No matter what happens? Even if I decide on something you don't approve of?"

"Yes. A teacher's job isn't to decide their students' future. It's to help them choose the future they want for themselves. If you choose not to help even after listening to what I have to say, I won't hold it against you, Nagumo-kun."

Hajime stared at Aiko for a while, trying to determine whether or not she really meant it. The reason he'd been so insistent was because Hajime himself didn't want to ever have to fight Aiko. After confirming there was no falsehood in Aiko's gaze, he abruptly turned on his heel and headed for the exit. Yue and Shea followed after him.

"N-Nagumo-kun?" Aiko asked, surprised. Hajime turned around and shrugged helplessly. He couldn't ever win against Aiko when she was serious.

"If I'm going to take on an army, there's some things I need to prepare first. You guys can keep talking if you want."

"Nagumo-kun!" Aiko's eyes lit up, to which Hajime smiled awkwardly.

"This is what the best teacher in the world advised me to do. And if it'll make these two happy then... I can't just ignore it, can I? Anyway, I'll go beat the shit out of those monsters for you." Hajime patted Yue and Shea on the shoulder, turned around, and left the building. This time he didn't look back. The two girls exchanged happy glances and headed out after him.

Once the door closed, the town leaders, who had been silent until now, all started pressingly into Aiko with questions. Aiko just looked at the door Hajime had left through, her shoulders trembling. Her words had gotten through to him, but she wasn't

happy at all. What she'd told him, the things she'd said about his current way of life being too sad, they were all her true thoughts.

However, that didn't change the fact that she'd guided a student into danger, and asked him to fight an army of monsters. She knew it was a contradiction, telling him she didn't want him to get too used to fighting his way through problems, and then tell him to fight his way through a problem. She did want Hajime to rethink his views on life, but she also wanted to save the town of Ur. In practice, she had probably achieved both those things, but... she slumped her shoulders, thinking there must have been a better solution and blaming her own incompetence for not being able to discover it.

She had hoped her students could all return home without any of them losing sight of their original selves... but it seemed that wish could no longer be granted. When she'd spoken with Hajime last night, she'd already known her dream was lost, but she wouldn't stop hoping.

Surrounded by a group of angry townsfolk, Aiko let out an almost imperceptible sigh. The students all stared at the door Hajime had left through as well, a myriad of emotions coloring their faces.

Incidentally, Tio had entered the building with Hajime, but all she said was "Even though I should be an important part of his fighting force... th-this kind of abandonment play is... Master truly is..." and so everyone present completely ignored her feverish mutterings.

The town of Ur. To its north were the Northern Mountain Ranges, and to its west was the Urdea Lake. It was blessed with natural resources of all kinds, and was now protected by walls that hadn't existed the day before.

Hajime had created those walls. He'd driven Steiff around the perimeter, transmuting walls behind him instead of leveling the earth in front of him.

As Hajime's transmutation radius only extended four meters past his point of contact, they were only about that high. Large monsters would have had an easy time climbing over them. They were basically a last ditch effort made with the mindset of "Well, it's better than nothing." However, Hajime had no intention of letting the battle even reach those walls.

The citizens had all been made aware of the impending monster army invasion. Judging by their speed, Hajime guessed their vanguard would arrive by evening of the next day.

Naturally, the town was in a state of panic. There were those that blamed the mayor and the other town leaders for letting this happen, those that broke down crying, those that clung to their family in desperation, those that tried to run, and those that started fights amidst the chaos. Most people couldn't remain calm knowing tomorrow their home would be destroyed and that if they stayed they'd die. Panic was the normal reaction to that.

However, someone managed to calm them down before the town devolved into full-scale rioting. That someone was Aiko. Taking the advice of the knights that had returned a short while ago, Aiko had stood up on a platform in the town square and spoken to the citizens. Her composed demeanor and overwhelming popularity helped her calm the citizens down to a reasonable level. In a way, Aiko Hatayama was more powerful than any hero.

Once the people had been pacified, they naturally divided into two groups. Those that couldn't abandon their homes, and were willing to share this town's fate, and those that were ready to flee and call for aid.

A lot of people in the group that chose to remain insisted the women and children escape at least. They believed Aiko's words that the monsters would be repelled, and the men went around the town looking to see if there was any way they could help, while the women and children prepared to run. The town remained brightly lit deep into the night, illuminating groups of people crying as they parted with their loved ones.

Those that were fleeing packed their things and left before the sun rose. It was high noon now, and those that remained were swapping between sleeping and working in groups. Most of those that remained did so because they believed their goddess and her friends would deliver them salvation somehow. That being said, they weren't just blindly praying. They too were doing everything they could to defend their home.

Despite the fact that the town only had a fraction of its population left within it, it was livelier than ever. Hajime sat down in his makeshift chair atop the city walls and cast his gaze far into the distance. Yue and Shea were next to him as always. The two quietly sidled closer to him and watched him lapse into thought.

Aiko, Yuka, the other students, Tio, Will, and David's knights walked up to the trio. Despite their noisy approach, Hajime didn't turn around. David raised his eyebrows in annoyance, but before he could say anything Aiko spoke up.

"How are your preparations coming along, Nagumo-kun? Is there anything you need?"

"Nah, I'm fine, Sensei." Hajime didn't turn around. Unable to stand his attitude, David angrily flared up.

"Hey, brat. Aiko... Your teacher's talking to you. Is that the kind of attitude you take with her? She's the only reason we're not grilling you about your artifacts and how you plan on taking down this huge army, you know that? You could at least—"

"David-san, could you please be quiet?"

"Gah... Yes, ma'am..." One word from Aiko instantly shut him up. He was like a trained dog. Though he was no beastman, it was easy to imagine him having dog ears and a tail. He obediently hung his head in remorse after being remonstrated by his master.

"Nagumo-kun. About the black-robed boy..." This was what Aiko had really come for. A pained look crossed over her face as she spoke.

"You want me to find out who he is, right? And not kill him?"

"...Yes. I have to be sure. Nagumo-kun... I understand what I'm asking isn't easy, but..."

"I'll bring him to you."

"Huh?"

"The black-robed kid. I'll bring him to you. Do what you want with him... I'll follow your decision."

"Nagumo-kun... Thank you so much." Aiko was surprised at how cooperative Hajime was being, but grateful nonetheless. Seeing as he hadn't turned around once during their conversation, it seemed to her that he had his own thoughts to contend with as well. Internally bemoaning her own powerlessness once more, she thanked Hajime with a strained smile.

Once Aiko was done talking, Tio stepped forward.

"Hmm, I too have something to discuss with you, M— Ahem... with you. Will you please listen to my request?"

"Huh...? Oh, is that you, Tio?"

"Wh-Why the long pause? Y-You could not possibly have forgotten me already... Haah... Haah... To think this could be so pleasant..."

Tio's voice grew so strange that Hajime couldn't help but turn back. As he did so, he scowled. Her elegant black and gold kimono had come partially undone, revealing the silky smooth skin of her shoulder, and giving Hajime an exquisite view of her cleavage. The hem of her kimono had somehow been folded up to her thighs, giving a tantalizing view of her legs... Her beauty was stunning enough that no man could forget it after seeing it once, but Hajime's response was incredibly casual.

"Oh yeah, I remember now." Somehow, instead of getting angry at being forgotten, Tio's blushed and her breathing grew heavy. Whatever the "this" she had been referring to as pleasant... was something Hajime decided he didn't want to know.

"Mmmmmm! Umm, once your battle here is over, and you have safely seen young Will to his family, will you be resuming your travels?"

"Yeah."

"I see. Well I was hoping... that I may be allowed to join yo—"

"No."

"...Haah... Haah... Such a prompt rejection. I knew you would make a wonderful ma— Ahem! Of course, I am not asking you to do this for free! If you agree to let me join you, then I shall call you master, and devote myself to you body and soul! Surely—"

"Go home. Better yet, go die." Tio spread her arms wide, declared herself Hajime's eternal slave, and Hajime just looked at her like she was dirt, and in fact told her to go become one with the dirt.

His instant rejection sent shivers down Tio's spine. Her cheeks flushed a deep rose color. She was clearly a pervert. A massive, raging, pervert. Everyone else was creeped out by her as well. Yue especially, as she'd held dragonmen in such high regard before. Her expression was a blank mask as she stared at Tio.

"How... cruel... Even though you're the one who made me like this... You have to take responsibility for your actions!" Everyone's gaze shifted to Hajime, a look of surprise on their faces. Hajime certainly couldn't allow his good name to be slandered like this, so he turned to look properly at Tio, a vein bulging on his forehead. He glared at her, waiting for her to explain.

"Aah, that scornful glare again...Haah haaah... Mmm... Well, you see, I am quite strong." Trembling under Hajime's gaze, Tio began explaining how she came to desire being his slave.

“Within my village, I am one of the strongest fighters. My endurance especially is far greater than the others. Even when someone did manage to get the better of me, they could never inflict any damage.” As the knights were present, Tio omitted the fact that she was one of the dragonmen.

“It was only after I fought you that I first came to learn the true pain and humiliation that accompanies a real defeat. Your fists rocked me to the core! And your dirty fighting style left a lasting impression! You left my whole body aching and... Haah... Haah...” Tio got excited telling her own story, and the knights, who didn’t know the details, looked at Hajime as if he were a criminal. The way she told her story, it definitely sounded as if Hajime had raped her. *How dare he be so violent with a lady,* the knights thought. The reason they didn’t give voice to said thoughts was because the lady in question didn’t look very upset. In fact, she looked euphoric, leaving the knights confused as to how they should react.

“...So Hajime opened a new door of experiences for you?”

“Verily so! I can no longer live without him!”

“...Disgusting.” Yue’s usually deadpan expression twisted into a frown. There wasn’t an iota of respect left in her voice. Hajime was so creeped out that he unintentionally let his thoughts slip.

“Besides...” Tio suddenly clenched her butt with both hands and said her next sentence in an extremely embarrassed voice.

“...You took my first.”

Everyone’s jaw dropped open as they stared at Hajime. Hajime’s face cramped up and he shook his head in denial.

“I most definitely did not.”

“I decided long ago that the only man I would consider being with would be one who is stronger than me... However, there was no one like that in my village... That was my first time... being held down and humiliated... and then you did that to my butt... You were so rough. I can no longer get married... so you must take responsibility for this.” Tio gazed up at Hajime with moist eyes, her hands still squeezing her ass. The knights looked at him with a mixture of fear and disgust. Disgust because he’d clearly raped this poor woman, and fear because he’d been so violent with her ass.

Even Aiko, who knew the truth of the situation, was looking at Hajime reproachfully. Even Yue and Shea averted their gazes, as if saying “Well, that was a bit much.” Hajime had found himself surrounded by enemies before the battle even began.

“D-Don’t you have a mission you need to finish? Isn’t that why you left your village in the first place?” Desperate, Hajime tried to plead his way out of the situation.

“Indeed. But fear not. My investigation shall be made even easier if I travel with you. Truly, it would be killing two birds with one stone... I’m sure your travels will grow stressful at times. Would it not be wonderful to have someone to vent those frustrations on whenever you need to? You can be as rough as you like. Is this not a wonderful deal for you, my master?”

“I can’t possibly see how having a pervert join my party would be wonderful in any way.” Tio clung desperately to Hajime, but he flung her away. That earned him the wrath of the knights, the disdain of Yuka and the girls, the jealousy of the boys, and a lecture from Aiko about not engaging in illicit sexual relationships. However, for some reason, Will was looking up at Hajime in awe.

Around the time Hajime was growing tired of this farce, he sensed movement on the horizon and quickly grew serious.

“...They’re here.” Hajime turned toward the mountains and looked off into the distance. They weren’t visible to the naked eye yet, but Hajime’s demon eye was receiving their images from his drones.

The horde of monsters was large enough to bury the earth. There were Bulltaurs, other humanoid monsters, massive black wolves three to four meters large, six-legged lizards, pythons with needles growing from their backs, praying mantis-like things with scythes for arms, spiders with tentacles growing out of their engorged torsos, white serpents with horns growing from their heads— Even through a video feed, Hajime could tell.

The army was massive. They kicked up a tornado of dust as they passed, and swallowed up the ground before them like a wriggling black tidal wave. Their murderous red-black eyes glinted in the black mass, a sea of corrupted rubies. There were even more than he’d initially seen at the mountain. At a guess, there seemed to be around fifty to sixty thousand in total.

Worse, the sky was filled with flying monsters as well. They looked like a flock of pteranodons. They were smaller than the wyverns Hajime had fought, but the dark red miasma oozing from their bodies spelled trouble. He was certain they were stronger than the Hyverias he’d seen in the Reisen Gorge.

Among the dozens of pteranodons, one of them was clearly

bigger than the rest. And while it was hard to make out, there seemed to be a human-shaped figure riding it. *That's probably the kid. I know Aiko doesn't want to admit it, but chances are he's Yukitoshi Shimizu.*

"Hajime."

"Hajime-san."

Yue and Shea tensed up, guessing from Hajime's sudden change in mood that the enemy was coming. He nodded to them before turning back to Aiko and the others, who were looking around nervously.

"They're here. And there's more than I expected. They'll be at the city in thirty minutes. There's a little under sixty thousand of them. There's a lot of different kinds, too."

Their faces paled when they heard there were even more than they'd initially expected. They exchanged uneasy glances. Hajime jumped to the top of the wall and turned back to them, a fearless smile on his face.

"Don't look so worried, Sensei. A couple thousand more's no big deal. Anyway, like we planned, you guys man the wall in case anything slips past. Though you probably won't have to fight." He spoke as casually as if he were on a picnic. Aiko squinted at his radiant confidence and responded to him in a worried tone.

"Okay... I know I'm in no position to say this since I'm the one who asked this of you, but please... stay safe..."

"Should we really leave it all to him?" "It's still not too late to evacuate." The knights muttered amongst each other, then began heading back to alert the town.

Aiko and the students turned to follow after them. They'd only gone a few steps when Yuka stopped. She was staring at the ground, a conflicted expression on her face. Atsushi and the others stopped too when they saw Yuka wasn't following. Confused, they called out to her. However, Yuka didn't respond. Instead, she steeled her resolve and turned toward Hajime and the oncoming horde of monsters.

"U-Umm! Nagumo!" She stuttered a bit, but still yelled as loud as she could. Hajime turned around, raising an eyebrow in mild surprise. He had thought she'd left with Aiko and the others. Yue and Shea turned around as well. Hajime silently waited for her to continue. Yuka hesitated for a few seconds, but then she found her courage again and glared sharply at Hajime.

“Th-Thank you! Thank you for saving me back then!” Yuka had finally managed to put her feelings into words. Her expression, her tone, and even the loudness of her voice made it sound like she was trying to pick a fight, but it was clear from her gaze that her gratitude was sincere.

Hajime tilted his head in confusion. He tried to figure out what he was being thanked for and came to the conclusion that it must have been saving her from Tio’s breath. Though that was mostly just a side effect of the fact that he’d had to protect Will. It took him a second to even think of it since back then they hadn’t even registered in his mind, nor had he really been conscious of the fact that he’d protected them too.

Yuka noticed that Hajime seemed to be thinking of the wrong thing, and hurriedly added to her statement.

“Umm, thanks for saving me yesterday too, but... I was talking about that time in the labyrinth, when you saved me from that Traum Soldier, and then stopped the Behemoth for all of us.”

“...Oh. You mean that time you were about to get your skull split open... I forgot that was you, Sonobe.”

“Umm, could you please not... describe it so graphically? It’s a kind of traumatic experience for me.” She covered her head, memories of that day coming back to her. Hajime stared at her expressionlessly, his head still tilted to one side.

“And?”

“Ah Umm... well... you see...” Yuka started stammering again, but then she took a deep breath to compose herself.

“I won’t waste this life you saved! Maybe you don’t really think anything of it, Nagumo, but I’ll still treasure this life you gave me!” It was the same thing she’d felt when she’d first resolved to stand back up again. It was only because Hajime, who’d been laughed at as worthless, had given his life for them that everyone else was still alive. In the end they’d found out he hadn’t actually died at all, but Yuka’s feelings hadn’t changed.

He’d still risked everything to save them. He’d put his life on the line for the sake of his classmates. She wasn’t going to waste that life he’d saved. Even if she was so weak she couldn’t even compare to Hajime’s pinky finger. Even if the events in the labyrinth still gave her nightmares. Even if she couldn’t be of any use in the battle to come. Even then, she’d keep trying.

Atsushi and the others all turned to Hajime and nodded

solemnly as well. Their feelings were the same.

Hajime's response was just two simple words.

"I see." Then, he looked back to the monsters in the distance.

Yuka couldn't even tell if he'd accepted her thanks, or if her resolve had meant anything at all to him. She simply stood there dumbly, unsure of what to do. Eventually, she turned around and began heading back to Nana and the others.

Hajime felt stares from both sides. He glanced both ways and saw Yue and Shea smiling at him. After how harsh Hajime's life had been since coming here, they were overjoyed to see this kind of warmth around him for once. They were also proud of how he'd done something that had left a positive impact on so many people.

Hajime scratched his head awkwardly and looked over his shoulder to say one last thing to Yuka.

"Hey, Sonobe."

"Y-Yes?" She hadn't been expecting him to say anything more and was so surprised that she jumped a few inches into the air. Everyone else was surprised too, though not to the same extent.

"You've got guts. I could tell even back then." Despite having nearly been cut literally in two seconds ago, Yuka had still rushed to save the rest of her classmates without a second thought. And even now, despite the trauma she'd suffered, she still kept fighting. Hajime really meant it when he said she had guts.

"U-Umm..." Yuka stammered, unsure how to respond. She couldn't figure out where Hajime was trying to go with his words. However, his next sentence cleared that up.

"A girl like you won't die so easily."

"....." Yuka stared silently at Hajime.

"Well, probably not, anyway," he added, ruining the moment. Yue and Shea gave him exasperated looks, but they were still smiling. To a bystander, Hajime's words probably seemed frivolous.

However, to Yuka they meant far more. They served to wipe away the dark sludge that had been gathering in the corners of her mind. And not just her. Atsushi and the other students had also first felt the fear of death when they'd seen Hajime fall. Hearing "You won't die," from the guy who'd actually almost experienced death carried far more weight than usual.

"...Thanks." Yuka's voice was barely more than a whisper, quiet enough to be carried away by the wind. She smiled at Hajime's back before turning around and rejoining her friends. The other

students all looked at her, unsure of what to say. Before they could say anything though, David shouted at them to hurry along. The students all responded with a cheerful “Roger!” and ran after him. They all looked somehow more energetic than before.

The only people left with Hajime now were Will and Tio. Aside from Yue and Shea, of course. It was obvious they had something they wanted to say as well, but they’d kept quiet until Yuka had finished.

Will dithered for a few seconds, unsure of whether he should say what he was thinking or not, but then he realized there wasn’t any time left. He shook his head, mumbled something to Tio, and then bowed to Hajime before hurrying to join Aiko and the students.

Hajime tilted his head in confusion, so Tio smiled and explained.

“He said that if I survive this battle he’ll forgive me for the deaths of his adventurer friends... And so, I humbly request that you let me assist you. My mana has mostly recovered, and even without transforming my flames and gales are quite powerful.”

The Holy Church looked down on dragonmen as subhuman and placed them in the same category as beastmen, but they were actually more like monsters in that they could directly manipulate mana. Sure, they weren’t like Yue, who could control all elements effortlessly without the need for chants or magic circles, but they could still at least use the magic they had an aptitude in without chants or circles.

Tio flashed her ample cleavage at Hajime in an attempt to convince him. He wordlessly pulled out one of his magic stone rings and flung it to her. She looked at it, puzzled, before realizing that it was a mana reservoir crafted from Divinity Stone.

“Master... to think you would propose to me before a battle... I... Of course my reply is—”

“Hell no. I’m lending that to you so you can be our turret. You better give it back when we’re done here. What the hell made you think I would ever propose to you?”

“...I see. So this is what they call a dark past.” Inwardly cringing at the fact that she’d once made the same joke as a pervert, Yue slumped her shoulders.

Hajime did his best to ignore Tio, who had completely tuned out Hajime’s words and was grinning at the ring in her hands.

Finally, the demon army crested the horizon and grew visible to the naked eye. Soldiers gathered on the walls carrying bows, or papers with magic circles engraved on them. The battle would soon be upon them.

Before long the earth rumbled from the pounding of tens of thousands of feet. A massive cloud of dust followed in the wake of the monster army, which was now close enough that their howls could be heard by the men on the wall. Some of them clasped their hands in prayer, while others looked on, pale-faced.

Hajime stepped forward. He transmuted a pedestal for himself, then turned to address the townsfolk. He didn't care too much for assuaging the crowd's fears, but he wanted to avoid letting a panicked riot break out as that might have result in friendly fire.

Everyone's gazes naturally focused on the white-haired boy glaring down at them, seemingly ignoring the horde at his back. Once he was sure he had everyone's attention, Hajime sucked in a huge breath and spoke in a booming voice.

"Listen up, brave men of Ur! Our victory is assured!" The citizens looked at each other in confusion. Hajime ignored them and continued, his voice full of confidence.

"Why? Because we have a goddess on our side! Men, never forget that the great fertility goddess Aiko-sama stands with us!" The people suddenly started whispering excitedly to their neighbors. Aiko, who had been guiding people from the rear as per her guards' instructions, suddenly turned around.

"So long as the great Aiko-sama stands with us, we cannot lose! She was sent to mankind by the heavens in order to lead us to victory and prosperity. And I am her sword and shield, an avatar born from her desire to protect the people! Behold! This is the strength of one who has received the goddess' divine blessing, the strength of the holy sword!" Hajime pulled Schlagen out of his Treasure Trove, then placed it on its stand to stabilize it. He kneeled, carefully aligned his scope with one of the pteranodon's that had gone ahead of the herd. The townspeople watched with bated breath.

Crimson sparks began running down Schlagen's barrel. Within seconds the barrel was coated in a veil of scarlet, giving it a suitably ominous appearance. Then—

Schlagen proved its fearsome appearance wasn't just for show.

Bang! The thunderous noise gave the onlookers a huge start. A

single red streak blazed through the sky. It raced toward the pteranodon faster than the eye could follow.

Like a spear thrust unleashed from god himself.

The pteranodon never stood a chance. There wasn't even time for it to dodge. A bullet faster than sound, powerful enough to pierce through the toughest steel, and coated with a diamond-hard full metal jacket, ripped through the pteranodon flying a few kilometers away. The shockwave was so powerful that it shredded the nearby pteranodons' wings, sending them hurtling to the ground below.

Hajime continued firing shot after shot without pause. The sky was filled with streaks of death, each one obliterating another pteranodon. He purposely avoided the huge one carrying the robed figure, but made sure the shockwave of his nearby bullets sent them flying back.

The massive pteranodon lost one of its wings to the shockwave, and spun to the ground with a piercing shriek. The robed figure atop it was flung off and flailed wildly as he hurtled to the ground.

Hajime wouldn't have an opportunity to let Aiko meet with the robed boy until after he'd cleared out the monster army, so for now he'd made sure he wouldn't be able to escape. Aiko would probably be horrified if she learned one of her precious students had fallen, but Hajime had only promised to bring him back alive, not unharmed. And since he'd fired from such a huge distance, he doubted Aiko had even seen.

In the span of a few seconds, Hajime had annihilated the monsters' aerial corps. Then, he rested Schlagen on his shoulder and calmly turned to the gathered citizens. Their jaws were hanging open in shock. However, Hajime merely grinned fearlessly.

"All hail Aiko-sama!" He raised his arms up triumphantly, extolling Aiko's greatness. A second later...

"All hail Aiko-sama! All hail Aiko-sama! All hail Aiko-sama! All hail Aiko-sama!"

"All hail our goddess! All hail our goddess! All hail our goddess! All hail our goddess!" In the eyes of the people of Ur, Aiko had become a goddess not just in name, but in truth. The citizens were no longer afraid. Each and every one of them looked at Aiko with eyes full of hope and worship.

Aiko blushed with embarrassment and started trembling. She looked up at Hajime and mouthed, "Just what do you think you're

doing!" Hajime, however, just shrugged nonchalantly and turned back to the oncoming army.

He'd had his reasons for hyping Aiko up so much. Firstly, to increase Aiko's influence so that she would be more useful when the Holy Church and Heiligh turned against him. He had no doubt that they would feel threatened by his overwhelming might, and seek either to use him or to bury him. And at that time, Aiko would surely turn against them for his sake, like she had before for her traumatized students.

And with this incident, her fame as a holy goddess would spread. Even without Hajime promoting her any more, rumors would spread. Thus, Aiko would soon be more than just a useful tool for the Holy Church, she'd be the common people's idol. Neither the Holy Church nor the king would be able to move against her for fear of inciting revolt. Furthermore, her leverage over the nobles and clergy would be massively increased.

Secondly, this way the townspeople wouldn't be afraid of him for displaying godlike strength. They'd believe he was some kind of soldier sent by their goddess, turning their fear and suspicion into relief and trust. So, even when the Holy Church turned against him, he knew there'd be people willing to help him all the same... Hopefully.

Thirdly, as it was his teacher who had convinced him to do this, he wanted her to share in the responsibility of what she'd started.

Lastly, and most importantly, this had been the only way he could think of to avoid starting a full-scale panic. It was possible there might have been better solutions, but there wasn't enough time to think. He had no doubt she'd scold him for this later, but this benefited Aiko too. Not only that, but this was a direct consequence of her own actions... or at the very least, that was how he was going to put it to her before making his escape and leaving her to deal with the aftermath.

The townsfolk's cheers were almost loud enough to drown out the roars of the oncoming monsters. Hajime could feel Aiko glaring angrily at him, while David remarked "What do you know, the brat gets it after all." He ignored them all and returned Schlagen to his Treasure Trove, pulling out two massive gatling guns, Metzeleis, in its place. Then, he put one on each shoulder and stepped forward.

To his right was Yue, and to his left, Shea. For this fight, he'd lent her his rocket launcher, Orkan. To Shea's left was Tio, who was still enamored by the ring Hajime had given her.

The army hadn't slowed at all when Hajime had shot down the pteranodons, and it was closing in rapidly. Four people stood against an onslaught of sixty thousand— It was so ludicrous that it didn't seem real.

Hajime glanced over at Yue. She looked up at him and nodded. He then turned to Shea. She too, nodded confidently, her bunny ears standing at attention. Finally, he... ignored Tio.

A faint smile played on his lips as he stared at the oncoming horde. He then casually spoke the words that marked the beginning of a grand slaughter.

"Let's get to it, then."

What the fuck... What the fuck is going on!? The black-robed boy, Yukitoshi Shimizu, huddled in the far back of the monster army. He'd hurriedly dug himself a makeshift trench and hidden behind as many defensive barriers as he could muster. The earlier annihilation of his pteranodons and the current rout of his army had left him cowering in fear.

True, the sudden shock had left him speechless, but he was still cursing profusely in his mind.

As Aiko had suspected, the mastermind behind this monster army was indeed her missing student.

Thanks to a chance encounter he'd had in the mountains, he'd made a promise to wipe out the city of Ur, along with Aiko and her guards. However, what should have been an easy victory had quickly turned into a veritable hellscape. Even now, his massive army was being torn apart like it was nothing.

Tatatatatata! Tatatatatatatatatata! Innumerable red streaks dyed the sky crimson, each one heralding a death sentence for one of his

monsters. Each lance of light pulverized another monster, regardless of its strength, race, or abilities. Without even an opportunity to resist, his army was quickly being reduced to a mountain of corpses. Hajime's guns fired twelve thousand rounds every minute, making him the very incarnation of death. Worse, every bullet packed such a huge punch that it pierced through enemy lines, killing dozens.

The pierced monsters were hit so hard that they ignored the laws of motion. Instead of being blown back, they just exploded into chunks of flesh. The monsters fled wildly in every direction, scrambling to get out of the line of fire, but Hajime simply fanned his two Metzeleis out in either direction, letting none escape.

The barrage was so fierce that Hajime was more like a mobile fortress than a person, and none of the monsters could even get close. They died by the hundreds, leaving behind heaping mountains of dismembered flesh from which rivers of blood flowed.

To his left, Shea was pulling Orkan's trigger as fast as its mechanisms would allow, firing missile after missile into the horde. Each missile impacted with an explosion dozens of meters wide, obliterating anything in its vicinity. Those in the center of the blast were blown to smithereens instantly, while those unlucky enough to only catch the shockwave had their bones shattered and their organs crushed, leaving them writhing in pain. Those behind them trampled the wounded to death in their mindless rush forward.

Once she ran out of bullets, Shea swapped out with a new launcher from the pile Hajime had left for her and continued blasting. The missiles fired from this one worked like napalm, exploding over the monsters' heads and spraying burning hot flames over the hapless beasts. Like his incendiary grenades, the missiles were packed with tar extracted from flamrock. The very same one that burned at over 3000 degrees Celsius. Hellfire rained down on the monsters, searing them until only ashes remained. And as the screaming monsters flailed about in the moments before their death, they spread the flames to their neighbors, creating a chain reaction. The monsters in Shea's area had one of two choices... be blown to pieces or burned to ash.

To Shea's left, Tio was wreaking havoc as well. From her hands she emitted black beams of light so hot they scorched the air they passed through. It was the same breath she'd fired on Hajime in her dragon form. It seemed she could use it in human form as well. Flames powerful enough to test even Hajime's best defenses ripped

through the army, burning straight through rows of enemies.

Tio gradually swept her arms from side to side, mowing down large swathes of monsters with her black barrage. When it finally stopped, the only things that remained were deep gouges cut into the earth. However, that single attack had drained her mana considerably. Tio tottered back and forth, her shoulders heaving. But with a single kiss of Hajime's ring, her reserves were replenished, and she straightened up once more.

She'd pulled mana out of the ring Hajime had given her. With a majority of her section already wiped out, Tio decided to forgo the breath and stuck to spells that consumed relatively less mana.

"Rise up, O furious gale, imbued with the crimson inferno of hell itself— Purgatory Blaze!" In order to keep her mana consumption even lower, she went out of her way to say the chant. A fiery whirlwind appeared in front of her. It was easily big enough to rank F4 on the Fujita Tornado Scale.

It was dozens of meters wide, and as it advanced it pulled nearby monsters into its whirling tempest. One after another, monsters were pulled into the rotating inferno of death. They were only freed after they'd been reduced to ash in the crimson furnace, and thousands of monsters' worth of ashes sprinkled to the ground like gray snow. Tio didn't stop until the ground was blanketed in soot.

To Hajime's right, Yue's extermination campaign was even more gruesome. When Hajime and the others had started, Yue had still had her eyes closed. Sensing that the right wing was safe, the monsters had all crowded in that direction to begin their assault. They were packed so close together that it was impeding their charge. Finally, when they'd closed the distance to within 500 meters of Yue, she opened her eyes. She muttered a single word. Despite her voice barely being over a whisper, it reverberated across the battlefield.

"Asura." That was the trigger for her spell. A spell that incorporated the gravity magic she had inherited from Miledi Reisen, powerful enough to influence the laws of the universe. It was such a difficult spell to master that even Yue, a vampire princess gifted with godlike talent in all areas of magic, needed time to build up the mana to cast it.

A sphere of darkness appeared above the monsters, similar to the one she'd summoned when fighting Tio. However, unlike that

sphere, this one started morphing. It stretched and stretched until it surrounded a section of the monster army on all sides. Then, once it had blocked out the sunlight and trapped the monsters, it fell.

The simplest way to explain what happened next was that the monsters, and the ground they were standing on, just vanished. To the people of Ur, who were watching the battle from the safety of the city, that was certainly what it looked like.

What had actually happened wasn't much more complicated than that. The pitch black blanket had fallen atop the monsters, crushing them under an immense weight that had created a crater ten meters deep.

Without even a chance to comprehend what had happened, the army of monsters had been flattened like pancakes. All that remained was a compressed pile of bodies in the crater below. In a single stroke, Yue had slaughtered two thousand monsters. Those unlucky enough to have been caught on the edge of the dome had had their bodies bisected, entrails and organs spilling from the remaining half of their bodies.

Because of the crater's sudden appearance, the monsters charging in from behind didn't have time to maneuver, and fell in rank after rank. The charge didn't halt immediately, and monsters continued falling in for a good few seconds after that. Within seconds the hole was filled with thousands of monsters, and Yue drew on her ring for mana, casting another gravity spell. And so, the first batch of corpses were joined by a second layer of crushed bodies.

The air was thick with the metallic, cloying scent of monster blood. The wind carried it over to the town, causing a number of people to start throwing up. But still, they couldn't take their eyes from the overwhelming might Hajime and his party displayed. Cheers of triumph rang out across the town.

David and his knights were staring dumbfounded as they watched the carnage unfold. Yuka, Atsushi, and the other students felt conflicted when they realized just how big the gap was between their power and Hajime's.

At first they'd been pumped to help him defend the town, but they soon realized they were just like the townspeople, simply being protected. And by the same kid who they'd all bullied for being "worthless." There were a lot of complicated feelings bottled up there.

Aiko was simply praying. For Hajime and his friends' safety. At the same time, she finally realized the full implications of what she'd suggested. Seeing the merciless slaughter before her, it felt like her naive heart was being pummeled by a sledgehammer of all the contradictions she'd averted her gaze from.

Around the time the horde of monsters had thinned enough that people could see the northern horizon between gaps in their lines, Tio collapsed. She'd used up all of her own mana, along with the mana stored in the ring Hajime had given her.

"Ngh, it seems this is as far as I go. My apologies... I cannot muster a single fireball more." Tio fell to the ground face-down, but mustered all of her strength to look up at Hajime. Her face was deathly pale as she apologized. It was obvious she'd used up everything she had.

"...That's good enough. For a pervert, you're pretty strong. Leave the rest to us and rest."

"You're so kind, Master... I was certain you would insult me, and yet... Though, sprinkling a few compliments in between insults is certainly enticing... Can I expect even harsher treatment from now on?"

"Go to sleep and never wake up." Tio's exhausted body tingled with excitement. Despite being white as a sheet, her expression was ecstatic. Hajime shook his head in disgust, then turned back to the hugely diminished swarm of monsters.

There couldn't have been more than eight to nine thousand left. The army had been well and truly decimated.

And yet, the monsters continued charging mindlessly. Or rather, a portion of the monsters were still mindlessly commanding the remnants to charge. Most of the monsters had completely lost the will to fight, but they still dutifully followed their leaders' orders to charge. It had taken their numbers to be thinned this much for Hajime to notice.

In her initial explanation, Tio had speculated that the robed boy had only brainwashed the leaders of each monster race's respective tribes, and had them control their clans. From the looks of it, her hypothesis had been correct. That was a very efficient way of gathering troops.

Even someone with overpowered skills like Yukitoshi, who had been able to brainwash a dragonman like Tio, wouldn't have been able to gather so many monsters in such a short time. That meant

the fastest way to bring this to an end was to simply cut down all of the leaders, whose movements had already been dulled by the fact that they were brainwashed. With their commanders gone, the monsters would return to following their instincts and flee in the face of Hajime's devastating might.

Hajime looked down at his two Metzeleis. Both of them were smoking from the barrel. It was clear the cooling system was starting to fail. If he pushed them any harder, they'd overheat. They were more or less at their limit.

Of course he could always repair them later, but as complex as their machinery was, it would take time. It wasn't exactly something he could do on the spot. It seemed smarter to just change tactics and weapons.

"Yue, how much mana do you have left?"

"...Mmm, about two rings worth. Gravity magic takes more than I thought. I need more practice."

"You already took down 20 thousand on your own, I'd say you're doing pretty well. I'm gonna try and pinpoint specific targets from now on, so just back me up."

"Okay." Yue managed to grasp the entire situation from Hajime's brief explanation and nodded. They really were perfectly in sync. Satisfied, Hajime turned to Shea.

"Shea, can you tell them apart?"

"Yep. There's the controlled ones that feel like Tio did, and then the scaredy-cat ones, right?"

"Scaredy... Yeah, pretty much that. The controlled ones are probably the leaders of each unit. If we can just get those, the rest of the monsters'll flee."

"Oh, good. I was starting to run out of bullets, so I wouldn't be able to keep this up much longer anyway!"

"Y-Yeah... Is it just me, or have you gotten a lot more fierce recently?"

"Of course I have. Who do you think I've been hanging around all this time?" Shea grinned at Hajime, who smiled somewhat kindly back. But there was no time for sentimentality on the battlefield. Hajime quickly put his Metzeleis back into his Treasure Trove and pulled out Donner and Schlag. At the same time, Shea threw down her Orkan and unslung Drucken.

There were about a hundred leaders left. Their manipulator was probably worried about losing control of the few remaining

monsters he had left, so he'd kept them near the back.

With Tio down for the count, and both Hajime and Shea's heavy weaponry no longer in play, the monsters finally saw their chance. They charged forth with renewed vigor.

In order to open a path for the duo, Yue cast another one of her spells.

"Draconic Thunder." Dark clouds appeared in what had been a clear sky seconds before, crackling with electricity. Seconds later, a dragon composed of lightning descended from the heavens with a thunderous roar. It swept across the monster army vanguard, its gaping maw vaporizing anything unfortunate enough to be caught in its path. The monsters faltered, their charge broken.

"Let's go, Shea!"

"Aye aye, sir!"

Hajime and Shea dashed through the gap. Hajime sped forward with Supersonic Step, firing Donner and Schlag nonstop. His bullets weaved through waves of monsters, finding the smallest gaps until they arrived at their intended targets, the monsters' leaders. Each bullet accurately struck a vital point, killing the monsters instantly.

The monsters in the vanguard couldn't understand why their leaders were dying one after another, so they started to panic. Around the same time, a shadow suddenly appeared above one of the monsters. It looked up, and saw a girl with rabbit ears hurtling toward it, a massive warhammer in her hands.

She used its head as a launchpad, and jumped further into the horde of monsters. Shea repeated that action a few times, skipping from monster to monster, until finally she jumped off the last one with enough force to crush it, and used gravity magic to lighten her body. When she reached the peak of her leap, she multiplied her weight exponentially and dove toward the ground. She was heading straight for where a clump of monster leaders were huddling together. Using the recoil from Drucken's shotgun blasts to accelerate herself even further, Shea hit the ground at breakneck speed. She transferred all of that kinetic energy into her hammer and swung down.

"Uryaaaaaaaaaa!" Drucken slammed into the ground with the force of a meteorite. The ground trembled, as if an earthquake had just occurred, and massive shockwaves spread out from the point of impact.

The Bulltaur that had been struck directly by the hammer was

crushed to a pulp, chunks of its flesh flying in every direction. After a long flight, they fell to the ground. All that awaited them now was a slow decomposition and a return to the earth from which they came. The monsters that had been nearby suffered a similar fate. Nearby rocks and boulders had been sent flying from the force of Drucken's impact, and they blew through the nearby monsters, shredding them.

Shea hefted Drucken out of the ground and dashed for another group of leaders. Naturally, the monsters weren't just going to stay idle and let Shea have her way with them. They crowded around her, hoping to overwhelm her with numbers.

"You're going to need more than that!" Shea pressed a lever, extending Drucken's handle by a good meter, and then used Drucken's shotgun recoil to start spinning like a top. The massive hammer, backed by centrifugal force, sent the monsters flying.

No Bulltaur was spared her wrath. A single dainty-looking girl was knocking monsters around like ping pong balls with a hammer several times her size. It was completely surreal.

Shea completed one full rotation, reset her stance, and started heading to the next group of leaders once more. But before she got very far, her sensitive ears picked up the sound of something rapidly approaching from her right. She calmly swung Drucken around, turning with her swing.

"Grrrrrrrr!"

"Wha—!?"

However, the four-eyed black wolf that had come charging at Shea had predicted her attack and stopped just in time to avoid getting blasted away by Drucken.

Normally, monsters would charge the moment they saw an opening. Shea had expected this wolf to be no different, and so focused her body strengthening on her leg, aiming a kick at the wolf's head. However, it acted contrary to expectations.

"Huh? Wawawah!" Instead of charging at Shea, the wolf leaped at Drucken, wrapped its powerful jaws around it, and tried to pin it to the ground. Though of course, with how much she'd strengthened her body, a mere wolf's strength was nothing to Shea. That being said, its movements had been so unexpected that it still succeeded in confusing Shea for a moment, which was all the time it needed. With perfect timing, another wolf leaped at Shea from behind, jaws open wide. Shea quickly undid the body strengthening

around her leg, then applied it around her entire body. This way, she'd be ready for the coming attack.

A second before it reached her however, something blocked its path.

A strange metal cross suddenly appeared, with a sixty centimeter by forty centimeter round shield attached to its center. The round shield blocked the wolf's path, preventing it from biting down on Shea.

"Fweh!? Wh-What the heck is this thing?" The wolf angrily tried to bite and claw its way past the shield, but the light crimson object didn't even budge. A second later, there was a deafening boom, and wolf's jaw was blown off.

"Graaaaaaah!" As the wolf writhed in pain, the cross suddenly floated above its head and with a second boom, blew its head off.

There was another series of booms, and Drucken suddenly felt a little lighter. Shea turned around to see two more floating crosses. They had shot the wolf through the head and stomach.

"Don't let your guard down, Shea. A few of these monsters are clearly on a different level than the others. They don't seem to be either brainwashed or following any other monsters' orders. I'll lend you three of my cross bits. Get the group of leaders over there. Yue said she can only hold the frontline for another five minutes." Hajime sent her a telepathic message to explain the situation. Shea quickly snapped out of her stupor and regained her focus. She touched the choker on her neck, which she refused to call a collar, and telepathically replied.

"Roger! Thanks for the save. You really helped me out back there!"

"Yeah, just be careful."

"...Fufu. You've started acting a lot nicer to me recently, Hajime-san. Just a little more and you'll be head over heels for me!"

Shea cut off the telepathic link before saying that last bit aloud. She smiled softly to herself as she looked at the mechanical protectors Hajime had sent her way. Her motivation renewed, she charged toward the remaining leaders, keeping an eye out for any more of those wolf monsters.

"Sheesh, that girl's always getting herself into trouble..." Hajime muttered to himself as he mowed down another wave of monsters. There were four crosses floating next to him as well.

These were the omni-directional, gravity-controlled weapons he'd created, cross bits. They functioned on the same principle as his Ornises, but these were designed for offense. They were each equipped with a rifle and shotgun, and he controlled them with the seven spirit stones embedded into a bracelet he was wearing. He had enchanted their outer coating with Diamond Skin, and with a command from his spirit stone, they could be transformed into powerful shields on a moment's notice.

His gun-fu, combined with the barrage from his cross bits, made him an unapproachable storm of death. He'd already downed forty leaders, and because his Intimidation was on full blast, many of the monsters had begun to flee.

"Hm? Isn't that..." At the edge of his vision, Hajime saw someone yelling wildly at the fleeing monsters. It looked suspiciously like a person's head, so Hajime used Farsight to get a clearer image of what it was. It was unmistakably a human head, covered by a black robe.

Shimizu was yelling at his retreating army like a child throwing a temper tantrum. Seeing as it was having no effect, he raised up his artifact, a staff, and began chanting. Hajime naturally had no reason to let him finish, so he blew the staff out of Shimizu's hands with a well-placed shot from Donner. The force of the shot sent Shimizu reeling back into his hole.

Hajime wasn't sure if it was Shimizu's doing or not, but a number of black wolves chose that moment to leap out from the crowd and try to take him down. Their strength and coordination was far greater than that of the regular monsters. They reminded Hajime of the Twin-Tailed Wolves he'd fought in the abyss. He guessed their strength was about on the same level too. They didn't

have the ability to manipulate lightning like the Twin-Tailed Wolves did, but judging by how they sometimes managed to dodge Hajime's attacks with impeccable timing, he surmised their special magic had to be Foresight. And their coordination was superb... In other words, they matched up to the strength of the weakest monsters in the abyss. Even that was an impressive feat, though.

Could they be from further out than the second mountain range? But even if that's the case... is Shimizu really working alone here? Hajime put those thoughts in the back of his mind. Right now, he needed to focus on the enemy in front of him. And so, he switched his attention from the monster leaders to the twelve black wolves leaping at him.

He spun in a circle, firing Donner and Schlag in all directions to try and shoot down the coordinated pack surrounding him. Sine he knew they'd dodge his initial barrage with Foresight, he used Foresight himself to aim for where he expected them to be after dodging.

Some of them managed to dodge even that though, which surprised him. It seemed that like the Twin-Tailed Wolves, they had a crude form of telepathy that allowed them to exchange information during battle.

In the split second it took Hajime to reload, one of the remaining wolves leaped at him from behind. However, one of his cross bit's slammed into it from above like a guillotine. Another one tried to use its downed comrade as a stepping stone to leap at Hajime, but he blew it apart with a shotgun blast from his artificial elbow.

The rest tried to surround to Hajime, but with a concentrated burst of fire from the remaining two cross bits, they were forced to abandon the idea. Hajime used Supersonic Step to slide through the opening his cross bits created, firing his twin revolvers behind him as he slipped out of the encirclement.

Two of the wolves tried to chase after him and set up a pincer attack, but Hajime's cross bits shot them down, so Donner and Schlag claimed the lives of two more.

"Graaaaaah!" Another one of the wolves was hit by one of the monsters that had been blown back, and hurtled toward Hajime. Hajime dodged to the side, killed the monster coming his way, and blew the head off the wolf that was tangled up with it. He then rolled to his feet, only to find a wolf inches from his face, maw

open wide. It had picked the perfect time and place to attack. Almost as if it had known where he would be. Anyone watching would have been certain Hajime had been bitten. However, Hajime swayed a little, and the wolf's teeth clamped down on empty air. He had somehow moved a step back in the span of an instant. He then pressed Schlag into the wolf's stomach and fired.

The remaining wolves all leaped at him, but for some reason every time they closed in, Hajime would suddenly be in a different spot. And every time, Hajime would shoot them down from point-blank range.

It looked almost as if the wolves were mistiming their own attacks, which in actuality they were. Hajime was using the derivative skill Illusion Waltz to confuse their senses. It was a derivative skill of Hide Presence, which left a decoy presence in the spot Hajime had been standing in for a few seconds while hiding his real presence. Because it looked like he was still there, the wolves couldn't figure out that he was hiding his presence. Of course, if they had stopped to observe him, they would have seen through the trick. However, it was very difficult to focus on observation while in the middle of a life and death struggle. And because these wolves relied more on their senses than most monsters, his deception was doubly effective.

Plus, he was augmenting his Illusion Waltz with Riftwalk, and using his cross bits at the same time, so wolves, even as strong as the ones in the abyss, would never have a chance to even touch him. And so, in less than a minute, Shimizu's trump cards had been annihilated without so much as putting a scratch on Hajime.

With the wolves out of the way, Hajime sent his cross bits out to finish off the remaining monster leaders. From the images his other cross bits were sending him, Shea would be done with her side shortly as well. Meanwhile, Yue's Draconic Thunder was keeping the remaining monsters at bay.

In another two minutes, they had successfully eliminated all of the brainwashed monsters they could find. After he was sure there was no one else left, Hajime sucked in a huge breath and let out a mana-laced roar of epic proportions.

"Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" His voice resounded throughout the battlefield. The sheer pressure of it intimidated the monsters, striking fear into their hearts. The entire army froze for a second. Then, they realized there was no longer

anyone ordering them forward, so they slowly began backing away. When no one gave chase, they turned on their heels and fled back to the mountains, all of them making sure to give Hajime a wide berth.

He was like a rock in the middle of a flowing stream, diverting the flow of their retreat around himself. As he watched the retreat, Hajime saw Shimizu try and make a break for it in the chaos. He was riding what was probably the last of the four-eyed wolves.

"What a shame. It's already too late. If you'd ordered all of your forces to cover your retreat earlier, you might have had a chance." Hajime got on his knees, took careful aim with Donner, and fired two shots in quick succession.

His aim was perfect. Sensing danger, the wolf quickly leaped to the side and dodged the first shot, causing the second to strike it directly in the femur. Without a leg to stand on, the wolf collapsed to the ground, throwing Shimizu off. With how high his stats were, the fall didn't cause any real damage to Shimizu, so he instantly got back up. He ran over to the wolf and started yelling something. When it didn't respond, he kicked it in the head.

He was probably trying to get it back on its feet so he could escape. From the looks of it, he was already in the grips of hysteria. Realizing it wasn't responded, he placed his hand on its head and started chanting something, most likely a spell to forcibly make it stand.

But Hajime didn't give him the chance. He fired another bullet at its head, putting the wolf out of its misery. Shimizu was sent sprawling from the force of the bullet. He got up again, and began running on his own two feet, mixing in with the horde of monsters fleeing north.

Hajime pulled out Steiff, then raced after Shimizu. The boy turned around when he heard an unfamiliar sound, and did a double take when he saw a motorcycle, something that shouldn't belong in this world, barreling toward him. He started running even faster, trying in vain to outstrip the bike.

"What the hell! What the hell is going on! This can't be happening! I'm supposed to be the hero— Gweh!?" He started spewing a stream of curses, but one whack from Hajime's prosthetic arm shut him up. Shimizu faceplanted into the ground and slid a few meters before coming to an unceremonious stop.

"Now then, I wonder what Sensei'll do with you? And

depending on how things go... with me." Hajime mumbled to himself as he tied Shimizu up with wire from his artificial arm and started driving him back to the city. Clouds of dust still hung over the devastated plains, which were covered in a sea of blood and flesh. Hajime drove Steiff through the carnage while dragging Shimizu along. He was well and truly defeated now.

For Yukitoshi Shimizu, being spirited away to another world had always been his dream. He knew it wasn't possible in reality, so he'd spent his free time reading light novels about being summoned to another world and daydreaming about his own adventures. He'd had countless fantasies about saving the world and winning himself a harem of girls.

Every inch of Shimizu's room was covered with posters of cute anime girls, and he had a display rack for all of his figures, many of which were in suggestive poses. His bookshelf was packed with manga, light novels, art books, and visual novels of all kinds. Those that didn't fit in his bookshelf were stacked up in corners of his room.

Yukitoshi Shimizu was an otaku through and through. However, none of his classmates knew that. He did a perfect job of hiding his hobbies. The reason was obvious. He'd seen how his class had treated Hajime. He wasn't brave enough to be open about his hobbies when he knew it would get him bullied.

In his own words, he was just some minor NPC in his own class. He had no close friends, so he simply spent most of his time in school reading quietly at his desk. He'd reply briefly if spoken to, but never initiated conversations on his own. Because of how much he'd been bullied in middle school, he'd grown into a shy and withdrawn young man. It had gotten so bad that he'd stopped coming to school, choosing to shut himself up at home. From there, it was inevitable that he would drown himself in books, games, and anime.

His parents had, of course, been worried about him, but as he slipped deeper and deeper down the otaku hole, his brothers started treating him like a nuisance. Soon enough, Shimizu felt unwanted even in his own house.

Though he never let it show, the constant bullying warped his personality. He began to harbor a desire to lord over other people. That desire manifested itself in the games he played, as well as the

fantasies he had.

That was why when Shimizu had finally been summoned to another world for real, he'd been overjoyed. Even when Aiko had been yelling at Ishtar to send them back, or when Kouki had been rousing the students to fight for the people, Shimizu had been lost in his own thoughts, thinking of how he would finally get to the become the hero he'd always dreamed of. Though he was elated at first, he soon began to grow discontent with his new otherworldly life. He came to realize that reality was very different from the fantasies he'd always had. First of all, while Shimizu did have overpowered cheat abilities, so did his other classmates. And the supposed hero wasn't even him, but Kouki. Because of that, he was still no more than a minor NPC in the eyes of his classmates, and the girls all flocked to Kouki.

It was no different from how it had been in Japan. Even though his biggest wish had been granted, Shimizu only grew more spiteful and dissatisfied with his life.

How come *he* wasn't the hero? How come Kouki was the only one getting all the girls? How come Kouki was the only one getting special treatment? He was certain that if he were the hero, he could do a better job. He knew that he'd be nicer to everyone if they came to him... He blamed others for all of his problems, and the egotistic conviction that only he was special began to eat away at his psyche.

It was then that the first expedition to the Great Orcus Labyrinth happened. Shimizu saw this expedition as his chance. No one ever noticed him. No one cared if he was there or not. But if he could show how awesome he was in a fight, his classmates would have to take notice of him. He didn't even realize how unrealistic his hopes were... but the events in the labyrinth later forced him to realize the truth.

He wasn't anyone special, the universe wasn't going to bend over backwards to make him seem special, and if he let his guard down for even a second, he'd die. All his fantasies were shattered when he found himself surrounded by an army of Traum Soldiers, with a raging Behemoth at his back.

And when he saw one of his own classmates fall to his "death," his poor heart shattered.

He'd kept himself going by making excuses and secretly despising everyone around him, so he was by no means strong-willed. Defeated, he reverted to being a shut-in when they returned

to the palace, but he could no longer turn to anime and video games to find solace. So instead, he lost himself in books about dark magic, as his profession was Dark Mage.

Dark magic generally influenced the target's thoughts and perception. In combat, its main purpose was to debuff enemies. He took to it like a fish to water, and he quickly grew proficient at creating illusions to disorient foes, interfering with their ability to cast magic, and even making them hurt themselves in confusion.

In his depressed state of mind, Shimizu came to realize something about the magic he was practicing. If he mastered dark magic completely, could he not control another person's mind? The thought brought him great excitement. If he was correct, he could manipulate anyone to do anything he wanted. Anything. That twisted thought took root in his mind. From that day, he devoted himself utterly to the study of dark magic.

However, things didn't go as well as he'd hoped. He learned that creatures with high intelligence, like humans, couldn't be brainwashed unless he spent a day or more continually casting magic on them. This also required them to not resist at all.

Of course, most people would react if someone tried to cast a spell on them. This meant he'd need to find a way to put his target to sleep for long periods of time if he wanted to control them. Trying to hide for hours at a time to cast a spell on someone was physically and temporally impractical. Furthermore, the risk of being discovered was far too great, so he'd been forced to give up on brainwashing people.

As he'd been despairing, he'd suddenly remembered the reason they'd been summoned in the first place was because demons had started taking control of monsters. Monsters were far more instinctual than humans, who had a much stronger sense of self, which meant brainwashing them wouldn't be as hard.

In order to confirm his theory, he'd snuck out of the capital every night to experiment on the weak monsters found in the nearby plains. He'd found that brainwashing them was far easier than brainwashing a person. Though it was only easy to him because of how much natural talent he'd already possessed. According to Ishtar, normal humans would have to spend their whole life to take control of one or two monsters.

Once he was certain of his abilities, Shimizu started craving stronger monsters to place under his control. However, he would

feel embarrassed if he asked to join Kouki's party now after all this time. As he was worrying about what to do, he heard about how some of the students were going to form an escort party to guard Aiko. He figured if he went with them, he'd be able to find some pretty strong monsters during his travels.

That was why when Aiko and the others had come to Ur, he'd disappeared and headed to the mountains to make more monster puppets. When he next returned, it would be at the head of a great monster army, and everyone would finally give him the respect he deserved.

Originally, even with his outstanding affinity for dark magic, and even if he'd focused only on the leaders of each tribe, he wouldn't have been able to control more than a thousand or so. And he wouldn't have been able to control monsters any stronger than a Bulltaur.

However, thanks to the assistance of a certain individual, along with the stroke of fortune that had let him control Tio, he'd been able to command monsters from as far away as the fourth mountain range. He forged a contract with said individual, who then started sending him more reinforcements every day. All that power finally corrupted him.

Convinced that he actually was special, he waited for an opportunity to unleash his might on Ur. However... he was handily defeated by Hajime, and brought to Aiko in chains... or well, ropes.

His all-powerful army had been mercilessly slaughtered. Hajime dumped the unconscious Shimizu in front of the students. His head bounced a few times on the ground before coming to a rest. Aiko and the others all gasped.

When she'd seen Hajime dragging Shimizu back, she'd waited for him outside the town walls. The only people present at the moment were Hajime, Tio, Shea, Yue, Will, the students, Aiko, David and his guards, and a few of the town's most important people.

If they'd brought the culprit into town, Hajime had no doubt it would have caused an uproar, so he'd met them all here. The mayor and many of the other town's prominent figures were busy dealing with the battle's aftermath.

Aiko hesitantly walked up to Shimizu, who was still unconscious. The fact that he was wearing a black robe, and that Hajime had taken him directly from the battlefield, proved his guilt.

She hadn't wanted to believe it, but now she had no choice. Aiko looked down sadly at Shimizu and shook him to wake him up.

"Aiko, he could still be dangerous." David tried to stop her, but Aiko simply shook her head. She asked he be untied as well. She said she wouldn't be able to have a proper conversation with him otherwise. Aiko still intended to have a teacher to student talk with him.

"Shimizu-kun, Shimizu-kun! Please wake up, Shimizu-kun!"

"Ngh..." Finally, Shimizu regained consciousness. He gazed around with unfocused eyes. A second later, he realized where he was, and came to himself with a start.

He tried to stand up, but the concussion still hadn't worn off, so he fell back to the ground. Terrified, he tried to crawl backward. His eyes darted from one person to another, his expression a mixture of wariness and fear.

"Please calm down, Shimizu-kun. No one's going to hurt you. I just want to talk to you. Why did you do something like this...? That's all I want to know. I just want to understand your feelings." Aiko kneeled down until she was at eye level, then gazed patiently at Shimizu. His eyes stopped darting about. He guiltily averted his gaze and that started explaining... or rather insulting everyone.

"Why? You can't even tell why? That's why you're all a bunch of incompetent losers. You all always look down on me... and go on about hero this, hero that. Even though I'm way better than that prick Kouki... none of you ever noticed. You always just pretended like I wasn't even there... You're all a bunch of retards! That's why I wanted to prove my worth to all of you..."

"You little... Do you realize what you did!? You nearly killed everyone in the town!"

"And you called *us* losers!?"

"Do you even know how worried Ai-chan-sensei was about you?"

Shimizu didn't show the least bit of remorse. Atsushi, Nana, and Noboru couldn't take it anymore and started yelling at him. Intimidated, Shimizu hung his head and went silent. Aiko couldn't bear to see Shimizu like that, so she stopped Atsushi and the others from going any further. Then, in as gentle a voice as she could muster, she responded to his words.

"I see. So that's what you were dissatisfied about, then... But you know, Shimizu-kun. I don't understand, why would you try and

get back at your classmates because of that? Why'd you try and attack the city? If you'd succeeded... and killed all the people of this town... even if you had an army of monsters at your command, that wouldn't have proven your worth." He looked up at Aiko, dark eyes peering through dirty bangs. He smiled thinly and gave a most shocking answer.

"It would have... to the demons."

"Wha—!?" Everyone except Hajime and his party let out a gasp of surprise. His smile turned into a triumphant grin, which only made his voice grow stronger.

"I went alone to the northern mountain range to brainwash monsters. But while I was over there, I met a demon. I was wary at first, but... the demon just wanted to talk to me. And they were the first one who understood. Who understood my true worth. That was why... I made a contract with them."

"A contract... you say? What kind of contract?" Aiko was shaken at the fact that one of her own students had made a deal with the enemy. But more than that, she was furious. She was convinced it was the demon that had led her student astray.

However, Shimizu simply grinned maniacally and gave the most disheartening answer she could've possible heard.

"A contract... to kill you, Hatayama-sensei."

"...Eh?" For a second, Aiko couldn't even comprehend what Shimizu had just said. The others were the same, but they recovered from their shock faster than Aiko. They glared at Shimizu with eyes full of rage. He shrunk back in the face of their unbridled hate, then desperately continued talking in an attempt to shake off their glares.

"What's with that dumb look? Did you really think the demons were just ignoring you guys? There's no way they could have ignored you, you're even more of a threat than the hero. The demon told me that if I killed you... if I killed the fertility goddess along with the rest of the town, that I'd be recognized as a hero. That was the deal." The corner of Shimizu's mouth twitched, and he continued in an increasingly louder voice.

"They told me. They told me my power was the strongest. That it was a waste for me to languish beneath the hero. They actually understood. They gave me all these super strong monsters, and the strength to make a huge army... so I thought that... that I'd be able to kill you for sure! So why!? How!? How did you beat my army!?

Where did you get those kinds of weapons in a fantasy world!? Just... Just what the hell are you!?" At first he'd been sneering, looking down on the students and Aiko, but as he continued his tirade Shimizu's expression grew more and more angry, and by the end of it he was yelling at Hajime and not Aiko.

A hint of irritation, hatred, and jealousy slipped into his expression, along with the weariness, the fear, and the odd sense of superiority. However, what eclipsed it all was the insanity in his voice.

It would seem that Shimizu hadn't even realized the white-haired boy was his classmate, Hajime Nagumo. Though seeing as he'd never said a single word to him, perhaps it wasn't all that surprising. He glared at Hajime with hatred so fierce that it wouldn't have surprised Hajime if he'd leaped at him then and there. Despite his tirade, Hajime didn't react at all until Shimizu said "You damn chuuni!" Those words had touched a sensitive spot. He gazed off in the distance, his heart shattered by Shimizu's callous words. Thinking he was being ignored, Shimizu got even more worked up.

Realizing what must have hurt Hajime so, Yue gently patted him on the back. Her kindness nearly moved him to tears. Hajime and Yue ignored the serious atmosphere and started flirting in their own little world. Possibly thanks to their blatant unwillingness to read the mood, the silence stretched on long enough for Aiko to finally absorb everything Shimizu had said and recover from her shock. She took a deep breath and grabbed Shimizu's hand. Though he talked big, it seemed he lacked the courage to do anything more, so he didn't move.

"Shimizu-kun. Just calm down."

"Wh-What the fuck!? Get away from me!" He tried to shake Aiko off, but she strengthened her grip, making it clear that she wasn't going to let go.

"Shimizu-kun... I understand how you feel. You want to be special. There's nothing wrong with that. Everyone wants to feel like they're special. And I'm sure you can even become someone special. Even if your methods were mistaken, you were able to do so much... Still, you mustn't side with the demons. They only wish to use you. As a teacher, I cannot allow you to entrust yourself to such selfish people!" Unable to bear the weight of Aiko's serious gaze, Shimizu gradually calmed down. He hung his head once

more, his bangs hiding his face. Aiko continued appealing to his rationality.

"Shimizu-kun. It's not too late to start over. If you say you're willing to try again, I promise I'll help you. Someone as strong as you can surely fight together with Amanogawa-kun. Don't you want to help everyone find a way home and go back to Japan with us?" Shimizu quietly listened to Aiko, but his shoulders were trembling. Everyone thought he'd been so moved by Aiko's speech that he was crying. In fact, Yuka, who was the most stoic person among their classmates, was already weeping. That was how heart-wrenching Aiko's speech was.

Sadly, reality was cruel to them on that day. Aiko moved closer to pat his head, when suddenly Shimizu tightened his grip on Aiko and pulled her forward. He then wrapped his arm around her neck and started squeezing.

He pinned her arms behind her back, and pulled out a short, ten centimeter needle from somewhere and pointed it at her neck.

"Nobody move! Move and I stab her!" He tried to sound threatening, but he came across as hysteric. His mouth was twitching, and he glared at Hajime with eyes full of madness. The reason his shoulders had been trembling before was because he'd been trying to hold in his laughter.

Aiko desperately tried to peel Shimizu's arm off her neck, but to no avail. Everyone froze, unwilling to risk Aiko's life on a rescue attempt. Shimizu was crazy enough at this point that they believed he'd do it. Everyone started talking at once, screaming at Shimizu, or worriedly calling out Aiko's name.

It was then that Hajime and Yue finally came back to reality. He'd been fretting about his over the top appearance this whole time, and was surprised to come back to see Aiko being threatened.

"Huh? When did all this happen..."

"This is a poisoned needle I took off one of the monsters in the mountains! One prick and she's dead! So, if you don't want your precious teacher writhing on the ground, drop your weapons now! All of you!" Everyone's faces went pale. Shimizu grinned, then turned to look at Hajime.

"Hey, you damn chuuni bastard! You, no not the person behind you, you! Are you making fun of me, you fucker!? Keep this up and I'll stab her! Hurry up and give me your gun! Your other weapons too!"

Still trying to escape from reality, Hajime turned around, as if Shimizu was talking about someone other than himself. However it didn't work, so Hajime turned back around with a frown. Despite the tense atmosphere, Hajime seemed unruffled. His nonchalant attitude irked Shimizu to no end. Thinking he was being looked down upon, Shimizu completely lost it. Still hysterical, he demanded Hajime hand over his gun.

Hajime looked at Shimizu with eyes cold as ice.

"Um, you say that, but... if you don't kill Sensei the demons won't accept you, so you'll have to kill her eventually anyway, right? In that case, what point is there in me handing my weapons over?"

"Shut up! Shut the fuck up! Shut up and give me everything you have! Retards like you should just listen to what I say! O-Oh yeah, hehe, why don't you hand me that slave while you're at it. Bring her to me!" Shimizu's screams were nearly incoherent. He'd been driven so far into a corner that he could no longer make rational decisions. Shea shivered when he looked at her, looking back at him with eyes full of disgust.

"You can tell me to shut up all you want, but you're still a loser... Hey Shea, don't hide behind me just because he creeps you out. You're just gonna make him more mad."

"But he's so disgusting... Just looking at him makes me sick... See, look at all these goosebumps! I didn't even know people could be this gross."

"Well, I suppose I can't blame you. He said he wanted to be a hero, but he acts more like a two-bit villain that dies in the first chapter." Whether because they didn't care, or because they couldn't keep their voices down in the face of such creepiness, their discussion was loud enough for all to hear. Shimizu's face went from beet red, to sickly green, to pale white. It would seem he'd literally become so angry that he'd gone insane.

With empty eyes, Shimizu mumbled "I'm a hero. I'm special. Everyone else is just a moron. It's all their fault. But that's okay, because everything'll work out. Because I'm a hero. Because I'm special." Then suddenly, he started laughing deliriously.

"Sh-Shimizu-kun... please... we can... talk... this out..." Despite the situation she was in, Aiko still tried to reason with her student. Aiko's words cut his maniacal laughter, and he started squeezing down on her neck even harder.

“Shut up! You keep pretending to be a good person, but you’re just a hypocrite! I don’t care about what you have to say. Just shut up and be a good hostage.” Shimizu’s gaze returned to Hajime. His earlier hysteria was gone. Now, his eyes were filled with nothing but hatred. He shot a quick glance at the revolvers strapped to Hajime’s thighs. Even without words, his intentions were clear. If Hajime hesitated for even a moment, he’d kill Aiko without a second thought. He no longer cared anything for his own safety.

Hajime sighed. Thinking he could just shoot a wire and shock them both with Lightning Field when he went to hand over his guns, he slowly reached for Donner and Schlag.

With how small Aiko was, and how fast he could draw and fire, Hajime could easily shoot Shimizu before he had a chance to do anything, but he decided Aiko needed to be taught a lesson too.

However, before he could hand his guns over, something happened.

“Huh!? Oh no! Get out of the way!” Shea yelled out as she leaped toward Aiko faster than anyone could blink.

Panicking, Shimizu tried to stab Aiko with the needle. Shea pulled Aiko free and dived out of the way. A second later, a torrent of water slammed into Shimizu’s chest, directly where Aiko’s head had been not even a second ago.

Hajime, who’d also been in the line of fire, diverted the stream with a shot from Donner. Someone must have cast Rupture.

Shea hit the ground shoulder-first, and sliding a few meters before coming to a stop. A cloud of dust rose up behind her, and she groaned painfully.

“Shea!” Yue frantically called out Shea’s name and rushed over to her. She took a protective stance in front of the two of them.

Inwardly thanking Yue for knowing what to do without him having to say anything, Hajime steadied Donner with both hands and used Farsight to find the source of the spell. He spotted a dark-skinned man in dark clothing with pointed ears and swept back hair riding atop a giant bird-like monster.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! After a second’s hesitation, he fired a volley of shots at the monster and the figure riding it. The man had predicted Hajime’s attack, so he made his mount do a barrel roll, barely avoiding the volley of shots. However, one had still grazed past its mount’s foot, blowing it clean off. Another had hit his arm, doing the same. Still, he didn’t falter for even a second,

and fled as fast as he could. He was clearly well practiced at making his getaways after assassination attempts.

Hajime guessed that was the demon Shimizu had made a deal with. He fled into the town and flew low, using the city's buildings as a shield.

Hajime grimaced as he realized this demon had a pretty good grasp of Hajime's offensive capabilities and was most likely planning on reporting that to his people. If he managed to escape into the woods that surrounded Urdea Lake, Hajime would have had a hard time tracking him down even with his Ornises, but there was something that took priority over all of that.

"Hajime!" For the first time in Hajime's memory, Yue's voice was tinged with panic.

Hajime holstered Donner and ran toward Shea, ignoring Shimizu entirely. She was resting in Yue's lap, her face scrunched up in pain. Next to her was Aiko, still cradled in Yue's arms. She too looked to be in considerable pain.

"H-Hajime-san... Ngh... I'm... fine... Please... l-look after your teacher... the needle grazed her skin..." There was a gaping hole in Shea's stomach. She'd managed to use her body strengthening to halt the bleeding, but it was obvious from her expression that she was in a lot of pain. Despite that, she still smiled faintly and put Aiko's safety above her own.

Hajime looked over and saw that Aiko was even paler than Shea, and her limbs were convulsing. Aiko's eyes locked with Hajime's. She weakly shook her head and pointed to Shea. It seemed she'd heard their conversation, but the poison had already left her unable to talk. If Shimizu had really been telling the truth she would only last for a couple more minutes, but judging from her condition, she didn't have more than a minute left in her. And the longer it took to heal her, the greater the chance that the poison would cause permanent damage.

Hajime looked over at Shea, nodded, and pulled out a vial from his Treasure Trove. It was around that time that the other students and guards finally caught up, and the area around Hajime turned into a cacophony of screams.

"Aiko, Aiko!"

"No... Sensei! What do we do? What do we do, Nagumo? Sensei's going to die!"

"S-Shea-san looks like she's in bad shape too! Goddammit! It's

going to happen again...”

Yuka and David were particularly shaken. The person they loved was on the brink of death, so it was only natural. It was even worse for Yuka since seeing Aiko on the verge of death triggered flashbacks to when she’d seen Hajime fall. She didn’t want to see someone she knew die again. The students and guards all crowded around Hajime, some of them were worried about Aiko’s safety, others tried to shove past him, and yet others tried to cast ineffective healing magic. With a single scream Hajime silenced the entire crowd, and they took a hesitant step back.

Hajime was honestly a little surprised. He was angrier about Shea getting hurt than he thought he’d be. Without him even noticing it, she’d become someone dear to him. And that was why he was so furious with himself for failing to consider the possibility that the demon Shimizu had made a deal with was waiting somewhere nearby.

He’d assumed that if anyone wanted to harm Aiko or the students, they would have done it while he was away fighting on the front line. So when no one had come for them during the battle, he’d mistakenly felt that they were safe from further threats, despite having no basis for that conclusion.

In reality, the demon had been hoping to assassinate Aiko in the confusion of the battle, but Hajime and his party’s strength had been so overwhelming that all he could do was watch. And so, he had waited for another opportunity while Shimizu and Aiko had been talking. He had actually planned on letting Shimizu finish Aiko off and just watch from the shadows, but midway through their conversation he realized with how powerful Hajime was, it was likely he could rescue Aiko before Shimizu had a chance, so instead, he’d tried to kill them both with his magic.

However, the nimble demon had made a single mistake. He’d included Hajime and the others as a target, in an attempt to eliminate all dangerous threats at once. Unfortunately for him, that had caused Shea’s special magic to activate.

Namely, Future Sight. Because Hajime, and Shea who had been standing behind him, had been in the path of the demon’s rupture, Shea had been able to see it seconds before it actually happened. Thanks to that, she’d been able to save Aiko’s life. At the risk of her own, she’d changed the future. Hajime wasn’t sure why she’d risked herself for Aiko when she hadn’t even known her all that well, but

he wasn't about to let her sacrifice go to waste. And so, he didn't hesitate to use one of his Ambrosia vials on Aiko. There wasn't enough time to try anything else.

Hajime took Aiko from Yue's arms and gently poured drops of Ambrosia into her mouth. Aiko glared at Hajime, angry that he'd helped her before helping Shea, but he ignored her. Right now, Aiko's, and even Hajime's desires weren't important. Shea's feelings took precedence over all of that.

That was why Hajime kept treating Aiko despite her protests. However, Aiko's entire body had started spasming, and she was having trouble swallowing the liquid that could save her life. Worse, she ended up getting it down her airway and coughed a lot of it back out.

"Tch, this doesn't look good... Looks like I don't have a choice." Seeing that Aiko no longer had the strength left to swallow on her own, Hajime poured the remnants of the vial down his own mouth and covered Aiko's lips with his own, forcing the liquid down her throat.

"Wha—!?" Aiko's eyes opened wide. The people around Hajime all yelled in surprise. He ignored them and plunged his tongue deeper into Aiko's mouth to ensure all of the Ambrosia went down her throat. There was no embarrassment or guilt in his expression. He was simply doing what he needed to save her life.

Finally, the last drops of Ambrosia slid down Aiko's throat. The pain began to recede from her body, the exhaustion and chills fading as the liquid worked its magic. Aiko felt as if someone had lit a fire inside her. In fact, it was almost as if someone had taken her frozen body and dipped it into a hot springs. Her entire body started trembling.

The Ambrosia had been effective, as always. Compared to repairing a body destroyed from the inside by monster meat, poison was nothing. The effects were instantaneous.

After a second that felt like an eternity, Hajime pulled his lips away. There was a single silver strand connecting their mouths. Hajime continued watching Aiko for a few seconds more, just to make sure the Ambrosia had healed her through the worst of the poison.

Meanwhile, Aiko was staring at Hajime with a blank look on her face.

"Sensei."

"....."

"Sensei?"

"....."

"Snap out of it, Sensei!" "Fweh!?" Hajime called out to his teacher multiple times, but she didn't respond. Annoyed, Hajime slapped her cheek, making Aiko let out a startled cry.

"How are you feeling? Does it still hurt anywhere?"

"Eh? Ah, umm, no, I-I-I'm fine. In fact, I feel better than fine... Wait, that's not the problem here! I-I didn't mean to imply that what just happened was what felt good, I mean the medicine!"

"Alright, good." Hajime dismissed the flustered Aiko with a curt nod and released her. Then, he looked back at Shea in concern. Though she was surprised by the sudden kiss, Aiko quickly composed herself, realizing now was neither the time nor place to worry about such things.

Hajime splashed half of another vial of Ambrosia onto Shea's wound, and then brought the remainder up to her lips. There was a faint hissing noise as the hole in her stomach started closing up. However, Shea refused to drink the rest of the Ambrosia and shook her head.

"H-Hajime-san..."

"Shea, why—"

"I want you... to feed it to me... ngh... mouth to mouth too~"

"A-Are you kidding me..." Even though she was drenched in sweat from the agonizing pain, the maddening rabbit still prioritized seducing Hajime over everything. Even Hajime couldn't help but admire such staunch opportunism. Still, he had no reason to kiss her in public, so he ignored Yue's silent entreaty and forcibly shoved the vial into her mouth.

"Mmph...!? Mmmgh... Pwah... Hajime-san, you meanie. I'm jealous of your teacher now."

"Hajime... Hmph."

"Huh!? S-Shea-san, that was different. He only did that to save my life! It's completely different from what you're thinking! I'm his teacher, I could never do that with a student!" Flustered, Aiko started explaining what everyone present already understood. Hajime sighed, a mixture of exhaustion and relief on his face as he turned away from Shea's pouting stare and Yue's disapproving gaze.

Then, before the peanut gallery could start up again, Hajime brought everyone's attention back to the person they'd forgotten.

Well, everyone except Aiko, anyway. After all, he was one of her important students. However, while she hadn't forgotten, she also hadn't processed everything that had happened. Hajime called out to the guard standing next to Shimizu.

"...Hey you, is Shimizu still alive?" There was a collective sense of realization as everyone's attention returned to Shimizu, who was still collapsed on the floor. Only Aiko looked around with a confused expression for a second before remembering what it was that Shea had protected her from. Her face paled, and she quickly ran over to where Shimizu was laying and grabbed his hand.

"Shimizu-kun! Aaah how... awful." He had a hole in his chest as large as the one Shea had had in her stomach. It was still spurting blood, despite the massive pool of it that he was already lying in. If he wasn't dead already, he wouldn't last more than a few minutes more.

"I-I don't want to die... S-Someone please save me... It wasn't supposed to... This... can't be happening..." Whether he was talking to Aiko or just to himself, no one was sure. Aiko desperately cast her glance around her, but the people around her awkwardly averted their gaze. He was already beyond help. And it was clear from their expressions that even if he wasn't, they didn't want to save him anyway. Only the students were different. True, they couldn't forgive Shimizu's atrocities, but they still didn't want him to die. They haltingly looked over at Hajime. Aiko, too, turned to Hajime and shouted desperately.

"Nagumo-kun! If we use that medicine of yours we can still save him! Please!"

"Figures..." Hajime sighed and walked over to Shimizu. He'd expected this, but even knowing what her answer would be, he still asked to make sure.

"Do you really want to save him, Sensei? He tried to kill you. Even if you're his teacher, you don't have to go this far for him."

I wonder how many teachers out there would be this desperate to save their student even after they tried to kill them. Especially for a reason as flimsy as "because he's my student." That was far above and beyond what was required of any teacher.

Aiko realized what Hajime was really trying to ask with his question. For a second her gaze wavered, but then she set her jaw and answered resolutely,

"You may have a point. In fact, you're probably right. However,

this is the kind of teacher I want to be. When I became a teacher, I swore an oath that I would always be there for my students. Nagumo-kun... please... save him..."

Hajime scratched his head and sighed unhappily.

"I guess that's just how you are," he said, defeated. He looked up at the sky and lapsed into thought for a few seconds. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Finally, he came to a decision. He opened his eyes and knelt next to Shimizu.

"Shimizu. Can you hear me? I can save your life."

"Huh!?"

"But before I do, I need to ask you something."

"....." At Hajime's words, Shimizu stopped his mumblings and looked at Hajime, eyes bulging in surprise. Whether those mutterings had been begging for salvation or cursing the world around him, it seemed Hajime had his attention now. After a brief pause, Hajime continued.

"Are you...my enemy?" Shimizu shook his head without hesitation. He smiled weakly and started talking.

"I-I'm not... I-I don't know what came over me. I promise... I won't do it again. If you save me, I-I'll do anything you ask. I'll make you... an army... I'll even brainwash any girl you want... I-I swear... I'll be loyal to you forever. Please... I'm begging you... save me..." Hajime's face went blank. He stared hard into Shimizu's eyes, as if trying to discern the veracity of his words.

Feeling as if his every secret was being laid bare, Shimizu hurriedly averted his gaze. However, Hajime had seen all that he needed to. Shimizu had sunk even further into insanity. Hatred, anger, jealousy, desire, and a hodgepodge of other negative emotions were all that he had left to him. He had sunk so deep into the darkness that the light could no longer reach him.

Hajime was certain. No matter what Aiko said, she could no longer sway Shimizu's heart. And if he saved him now, Shimizu would definitely come back as an enemy someday. Of course, there was only one fate that awaited enemies...

Hajime looked over briefly at Aiko. Their eyes met. In that instant, Aiko realized what Hajime was about to do. The blood drained from her face, and she tried to stop him.

"Don't!" However, Hajime was faster. Two gunshots resounded throughout the town.

"Huh!?" Someone let out a gasp of surprise.

One shot to the head, another to the heart. Shimizu was granted a certain and swift death at Hajime's hands.

No one said a word in the seconds that followed, and the only thing that moved was a thin plume of white smoke rising from Hajime's revolver. Finally, a tiny voice broke through the oppressive silence.

"Why?" Aiko. She stared dumbfounded at the empty shell that was Shimizu's corpse. His soul had already begun the journey to the afterlife.

Hajime turned to look at Aiko. She quietly met his gaze. In her eyes was a mixture of anger and sadness, doubt and fear. Each of her emotions vied for supremacy, appearing and disappearing at regular intervals.

"Because he was my enemy." His answer was short and to the point.

"No! Shimizu-kun was..."

"Did you honestly believe you could reform him? Sorry, but I'm not trusting enough to believe that. And more importantly, I have faith in my ability to judge people." At the end, Shimizu's eyes had betrayed just how far he had fallen.

Hajime had hoped that Aiko's compassion would have shown him the error of his ways, as he was on the brink of death. He had hoped she could save Shimizu the way Yue had once saved him...

That was why he'd asked what he did. If there was any hope for him at all, Hajime would have been willing to hand Shimizu over to Aiko and give him a second chance, though he would have kept an eye on him. However, even as he lay dying, there was not an iota of remorse in him.

Aiko must have also realized it, but because she believed in her principles as a teacher, she couldn't abandon him. Not without abandoning who she was.

"That doesn't mean you had to kill him! If we'd just locked him up in the palace, maybe when we'd finally made it back to Japan he'd... There was still a chance!"

"I know no matter what I say, you won't be able to accept what I did, Sensei. I killed one of your precious students. I'll let you decide what you want to do with me."

"But that's..."

"You said that my way of life was 'lonely.' Those words really made me rethink a lot of things. Even so, I don't think I can change

my mindset so easily... not in this world where life is cheaper than dirt. And honestly, I don't want to. Rather, I don't have the luxury to."

"Nagumo-kun..."

"I may do the same thing again. If I think it's necessary... I'll pull the trigger as many times as it takes. If you think I'm wrong... then do what you think you must, Sensei. Just remember, whether it's you, or any of my other classmates, I'll kill anyone that becomes my enemy without hesitation." Aiko bit her lip and hung her head. She was the one who had told Hajime that she wouldn't hold it against him if he chose not to help after listening to what she said. Now she didn't know what else to say.

Hajime silently turned on his heel and headed back to Yue and Shea. There was nothing more for him to do here. Seeing his piercing gaze, Will reluctantly followed behind Hajime, though he frequently glanced back to see how Aiko and the town was faring.

The mayor and Aiko's guards reached out to stop Hajime, but gave up when he unleashed his Intimidation. Though they were interested in his artifacts, and in himself as a person, the memory of what he'd done to the monster army was still fresh in their minds, so their outstretched hands limply fell to their sides.

"Nagumo..." Yuka muttered. She didn't want to stop him. She wasn't even sure why she'd called out to him. The whirlwind of events that had just occurred had left her too confused to know what she was feeling anymore. Atsushi and the others looked like they wanted to say something too, but their emotions were too jumbled up for them to get the words out.

"Nagumo-kun! I... I..." Though she still didn't know what to say, Aiko's pride as a teacher refused to let Hajime go just like that. Hajime stopped and said something without looking back.

"Sensei, your ideals are already dead, but despite all that, I'm glad that even in this world, you continue to be our teacher no matter what. I hope you can continue to stay strong." He started walking again and didn't stop until he was outside the ring of villagers. Then, he pulled out Brise and rode off into the distance, leaving behind a solemn group of students and a town full of people still happy to be alive.

Hajime drove south down the highway, with Brise kicking up clouds of dust that obscured the mountains to the north. It was

more a trail that had been pounded down by thousands of feet over hundreds of years than a proper road, but it was still infinitely better than the rough path they'd taken to the mountain. Brise was equipped proper suspension, so the drive was far smoother than their last trip.

Shea seemed to prefer Steiff over Brise however, as she'd opened her window and stuck her head outside to enjoy the outside air. Her rabbit ears flapped wildly in the breeze. She much preferred a style of travel where she could feel the wind whistling past her ears and could wrap her arms around Hajime.

As always, Hajime was in the driver's seat. Next to him was, of course, Yue. Next to her was Shea, while Will sat in the back. Will leaned forward and asked Hajime something in a hesitant voice.

"Umm, was it really okay to just leave like that? Shouldn't you have talked things through a bit more... especially with Aiko-dono?" Hajime responded casually without turning around.

"Hm? Nah, not really. If I'd stayed any longer, then things would have just became more of a pain... Plus, I think it's better for Sensei if I'm not near her for a while."

"I suppose you have a point..."

"You're... really soft, you know that? Like... you're always worrying more about others than yourself."

Will smiled awkwardly at that. Not only had he mourned over the deaths of adventurers he couldn't have known for more than a few days, he stayed behind to help townspeople that had nothing to do with him, and even forgave Tio. And now, despite the fact that Hajime had practically kidnapped him, Will was still worried about Hajime's relationship with Aiko. Hajime had figured any noble willing to throw their life away to become an adventurer would have to be an oddball, but this was even more than that. Will was kind to a fault, to the point where even Hajime worried about him a little.

"...You're a nice person."

"Yeah, you really are～"

"Indeed, you are a kind man."

Will was momentarily flummoxed. He knew they were praising him, but it felt weird as a guy to be called nice by girls.

"Wh-Who cares about me... I just wanted to say you should have explained your reasons properly."

"My reasons?" Hajime raised his eyebrows in confusion. Will

scratched his cheek awkwardly before continuing.

"Yes. Your reasons for killing that boy... even though you knew it would cause Aiko-dono pain."

"I did, didn't I? He was an enemy, so..."

"Even if that was a good enough reason not to save him, that wasn't a good enough reason to kill him, right? After all, he'd already been fatally wounded. You could have just left him there to die, but you killed him instead. We both know there was a reason for that."

"...You're a pretty sharp kid." Will was absolutely right. Hajime had assumed the impact of killing Shimizu while Aiko was begging him to save him had been enough to hide his true intentions, but while his other classmates had been shocked, it seemed Will had seen right through him.

Are all nobles this good at observing people, or just him? Hajime was honestly impressed.

"Come to think of it, that was bugging me too," Shea said, as she pulled her head back in to better hear their conversation. Hajime hesitated for a moment, unsure of how to answer. But before he could say anything, Yue answered for him.

"Hajime's a tsundere."

"....."

"Tsundere?" Hajime kept a perfect poker face, hiding his true thoughts from plain sight. The others all repeated the unfamiliar word, confused.

"Were you trying to repay her kindness? Or was that just your way of looking out for her?"

"I just did it because the opportunity was there." Hajime sulkily turned away. Realizing Yue must have figured it out, Shea and Will huddled in closer for an explanation.

Since it didn't look like Hajime would elaborate, it fell to Yue to explain. The gist of it was that Hajime hadn't wanted Aiko to feel responsible for Shimizu's death.

Shimizu had said it himself. The demon he'd made a contract with had wanted to kill Aiko. It was obvious he'd used Shimizu for that very purpose. That last attack of his had clearly been aimed at Aiko. Shimizu had just been collateral damage.

Naturally, his death was in no way Aiko's fault. He'd sold his soul to a demon of his own free will because of his greed. He'd reaped what he'd sown. And even if you decided he wasn't to blame

for his own actions, it was clearly the demon who had dealt the fatal blow, and thus his fault.

However, would Aiko have been able to accept that? It was obvious to everyone present that the last attack had been aimed at her. Furthermore, Aiko had a strong sense of justice, especially when it came to her students. It was highly likely that she would have thought it was her fault for getting Shimizu involved in that attack. She would have believed it was her fault that he had died. Would she have been able to bear that guilt? Hajime at least hadn't thought so.

From the start, Aiko had been the most uneasy and afraid of the world they'd been summoned to. Despite that, she'd never once stopped, complained, or given in to her fear. No matter the situation, she had always done everything in her power to help her students. After all, that was what it meant to be a teacher in her mind.

It was easy to imagine what would happen if she started to believe she was responsible for killing one of the students she had sworn to protect. The pain would be far greater than when she'd heard Hajime had died, far greater even than when he'd told her one of her precious students had been the one that had betrayed him. Enough to break her, basically.

Hajime obviously hadn't wanted Aiko to break so that he could keep her as a future ally, but he had also been genuinely worried about her. He had always felt Aiko had been a bit too idealistic. That had been the reason she was so full of contradictions.

But even so, he'd believed the words she'd given him would lead Yue and Shea to a better, happier life. That was why, even though they were in a different world, even though Hajime was a completely different person, he'd still been grateful for the lecture she'd given him as his teacher.

That was why Hajime had killed Shimizu himself. He had wanted to impress as strongly as possible that Shimizu had been *his* enemy. And that it was Hajime who bore the responsibility of his death. He had felt that had been the least he could do to keep Aiko from breaking, to make sure she could always be the teacher she dreamed of being.

"Fufu, you really are a tsundere, Hajime-san."

"So that's what it was..."

"I see. So Master has a cute side to him as well, then."

Everyone looked playfully at Hajime after Yue finished explaining his motives. Hajime pointedly continued not looking at anyone.

"But I think Aiko will find out."

"....." Hajime looked silently over to Yue. She gazed back at him, eyes full of kindness.

"Aiko is your teacher. Someone whose words are powerful enough to move you. She'll discover the truth eventually."

"Yue..."

"Don't worry. She's strong. Things won't end up the way you fear."

"....."

Yue held a lot of respect for Aiko. She was the only one who'd managed to get Hajime to think back on the humanity he'd thrown away, something even Yue hadn't been able to do.

Hajime saw an unwavering strength and kindness in Yue's eyes, which softened his own gaze. Yue's words had cleared away the dark thoughts he'd been brooding over. He no longer felt as worried about Aiko and what would happen to her in the future.

"Haah, there they go, off in their own little world again. When will I get to be like that with him?"

"Th-This is... really sweet, isn't it?"

"Hmm, while I personally prefer being insulted and debased... that looks somewhat enticing as well."

The other three watched Hajime and Yue with a mixture of awkwardness and jealousy. Shea had puffed her cheeks out and was pouting loudly.

Sensing her displeasure, Yue looked over at Shea, and then back to Hajime. The silent entreaty in her gaze was clear. "Shea deserves a reward too." Shea had risked her life to save Aiko. If it hadn't been for her Future Sight and timely intervention, Aiko would have died. Hajime definitely owed Shea for saving his teacher's life. He understood that full well, so though he grumbled a little he dutifully turned to Shea.

"Shea. Umm, you were a real lifesaver. It's a bit late, I know, but... thank you."

"...Who are you?"

He'd worked up his courage to finally convey his gratitude, and all he got in return was a surprised stare and those words. A vein throbbed in Hajime's forehead, but he knew he deserved it, so he

held his anger in.

"Well, I guess it's my fault your reaction's like that... but honestly, I really am grateful, you know?" This time Hajime properly met Shea's gaze and showed his gratitude once more. Shea felt a jolt of electricity run through her body, then she started fidgeting abashedly. Her cheeks were bright red, and she was looking anywhere but at Hajime. Her rabbit ears danced from side to side as well.

"U-Umm... It wasn't anything special, so you really don't need to thank me or anything... J-Jeez... What's with you all of a sudden! That's really embarrassing, you know... Ehehe."

Hajime smiled faintly and asked something that had been bugging him for a while.

"Shea. I was wondering... why'd you jump in to save Sensei? It's not like you knew her that well or anything. Not enough to risk your life for her, at least..."

"Because she's someone important to you, Hajime-san."

"That's it?"

"Huh? Well, yeah, that's the only reason."

"I see..." Hajime's expression was hard to read. Aiko certainly was an important existence to him. Unlike most of his classmates, he would've actually cared if she died, so he was glad she'd survived.

Though he couldn't remember ever saying or doing anything that had shown he cared about Aiko more than other people... it looked like both Yue and Shea could read him like an open book regardless. *I guess it shows that's how much they're always thinking of me. I know it's a bit late to be realizing it now, but I really have some great companions.*

Even without Yue urging him on, Hajime knew Shea deserved some kind of reward.

"Shea. Is there anything you want me to do for you?"

"Eh? Anything I want you... to do for me?"

"Yeah. Think of it as like... a reward for your hard work. Just keep it reasonable, okay?"

Shea was taken aback. She'd just done what anyone would have for their comrades, so she felt like Hajime was exaggerating her achievements a little. She groaned to herself and looked to Yue for help, but Yue just looked back kindly and nodded. "This is Hajime's way of saying thanks, you should just take it," her gaze seemed to

say. Shea thought about it for a few seconds more, then broke out into a wide grin. She nodded back to Yue and turned to Hajime.

"Okay, then I want you to take my first—"

"Denied." Hajime instantly shot her down. Shea glared sulkily at him.

"But why? That was clearly supposed to be your dere moment! Right? Right? Come on, can't you read the mood a little!?"

"I told you to keep it reasonable."

"That's totally reasonable! You do it with Yue-san all the time! Don't think I don't see you two sneak off every now and then! How do you think I feel, watching you two go off to have sex all the time!? I bet you two are going to send me off on some errand when we get to Fuhren so you can fuck like rabbits all day again! Hic... I'm... I'm going to be sent off alone again. And then I'll have to pretend I don't notice Yue-san's disheveled hair when I get back... Poor me..."

"Come on, don't cry... Yue's the one I'm in love with, I can't change that now. And you, well, I do care about you, but that's not really the same thing as love... so you know..."

"Waaa... Hajime, you limp-dick bastard!"

"Hey..."

"Dickless wimp! Homo! Good-for-nothing loser! Pervert!" In the span of a few seconds, Shea's excitement had transformed into indignation. She let out all of her pent-up frustration at once, pelting Hajime with insults. Behind her, Will and Tio let out a chuckle.

"Hahaha... She really called the guy who wiped out an army of sixty thousand monsters... a limp-dick bastard... Hahaha."

"Master is surprisingly pure at heart. To think he hasn't even lain with her yet... I suppose that means even I'm ahead of her, as he violated my anus..."

They made no effort to hide their voices. Hajime seriously considered throwing them out of the car for a second, but Yue's reproachful glare kept him in check.

Hajime awkwardly turned back to Shea. He promised to himself he'd strangle Will later. As for Tio... she'd only enjoy it, so he decided to ignore her.

"Shea. Can't you lower the bar a bit? Anything else, I'll..."

"...Hajime, is it really impossible?" For some reason, Yue was taking Shea's side. Shea hugged Yue and started sobbing in her

arms.

It was obvious Yue had no problem with Hajime sleeping with Shea. Yue had really started taking a liking to Shea. At first their relationship had been more like friends, but it had grown into something more akin to an older sister looking after her excitable younger sibling. And said older sister seemed to have a huge sister complex.

It wasn't everyday someone's lover asked them to have sex with another girl. Hajime buried his face in his hands, despairing. But no matter what anyone said, he had his own principles.

"The only person my heart desires is you, Yue. I don't have anything against Shea, and I do care about her, but... I can't treat her the same as you." Yue let out a strange sound in response. Shea's rabbit ears perked up and she looked suspiciously at Hajime, suddenly wary.

"I want to be faithful to you Yue. And no matter what the reason is, I don't think I could accept you having another man, either. Call me selfish or petty all you want, but... I was hoping you'd feel the same way about me, Yue. So whether it's Shea, or any other girl, could you please stop telling me to have sex with them?"

"...Hajime." With Shea still in her arms, Yue stared into Hajime's eyes, a faint blush spreading across her cheeks. Hajime gently stroked her cheek. The two were lost in their own world again. It almost seemed as if the air around them turned visibly more pink. Shea slowly nudged her way closer and closer to their faces.

"They've totally forgotten about me again, haven't they? Even though this was supposed to be about my reward..." Shea glared daggers at the two of them. However, they were too busy flirting to notice. Finally, they came back to reality and slowly broke away from each other. Yue shyly twirled a stray strand of hair with her fingers.

She hadn't been ready for such a passionate confession, so there was still a faint smile on her usually expressionless face. Other people might have found Hajime's words a bit too possessive, but Yue couldn't have been happier to hear them. That was why she'd forgotten about everything but him for a few minutes.

"I see. So that's how your relationship is, then... It must be hard for you, Shea-dono."

"Hmm... Master's bond with Yue certainly is strong. Squeezing

your way inside it won't be easy... but well, I'm satisfied just being insulted, so it's of no matter to me."

Will quietly watched their sickeningly sweet displays of affection. Next to him, Tio was panting heavily, but he pretended not to hear her.

"...I'm sorry, Hajime. But I really think... Shea deserves to be rewarded too... Can't you at least spend one day... with just her?"

"Yue-saaaaaaan." Despite everything, Yue still insisted on including Shea. She gently patted Shea's head, who dug her face even deeper into Yue's chest. Hajime smiled, clearly defeated, and replied to her.

"If that's all, you don't even need to ask. But Shea, are you really okay with me just saying yes because Yue asked me? If there's anything else you want to ask, I won't say no."

"Hajime-san... it's fine, really. I don't care how I get you to like me, as long as it happens somehow!"

"You really don't give up, huh...?"

"Well, I guess that's too much to ask for right now, so I'll settle with a date for now. I'll just have to work my way up. When we get back to Fuhren, you're taking me around the tourists' district, alright?"

"Yeah, sounds good." Hajime had tried to emphasize once more that it was only Yue that he gave special treatment to, but despite picking up on his hint, Shea refused to give up. In a way, he had to respect her tenacity. *Well, I guess it's okay to do what she wants every now and then,* Hajime thought to himself as he agreed to the date.

Hajime still held Shea dear, and she had saved Aiko's life, so this time he was willing to take Shea on a date for her own sake, not because Yue had asked him. Shea let out a whoop of joy, and Yue gently stroked her twitching rabbit ears.

"I feel rather out of place here. It's like I'm intruding on a happy family gathering."

"I-Indeed. This is completely different from being deliberately ignored... Rather than stimulating, it just feels lonely... Honestly, I do wish someone would say something to me. I am here, you know? You can let me into your conversations, you know?"

Will watched the trio's flirting with an awkward expression. Though no one had invited her to join, Tio had stowed away in Brise's truck bed. At some point she'd stuck her head in through the window and joined in the conversation of her own accord.

She'd asked Hajime to be allowed to travel together with him before the battle, but once it had ended he'd more or less forgotten she'd even existed and left without her. Tio had hurriedly chased after him and managed to leap into Brise's trunk before Hajime took off. Her excessive panting had creeped everyone out, however, so they'd ignored her even when she stuck her head through the window.

At first Hajime had driven like a madman to try and throw her off, but Tio had used her considerable mana reserves to hang on through even the roughest turns. As his rough driving had only served to excite Tio more, Hajime had eventually given up and resorted to just ignoring her. After all, giving a pervert attention of any kind was just playing into their hands.

At first Tio had enjoyed deliberately being ignored, but before long she grew lonely as she saw the trio up front having fun, and started begging for attention.

However, even then they ignored her, so she slowly started trying to slide into the backseat through the window. The way her black hair covered her face as she creeped forward bore a striking resemblance to the girl from The Ring.

Though he'd been trying to ignore her, when he caught sight of how she looked, Will let out a high-pitched shriek and backed away. Hajime and the others turned around to see what the problem was.

"Hm? I-I seem to be stuck. My bosom is... getting in the way. Excuse me, young Will, could you lend me a hand?" Tio stretched out a hand to Will, her massive breasts contorting painfully due to the window's small size. She really looked like a banshee trying to curse someone. Hajime casually pulled Schlag out of its holster and fired at Tio over his shoulder.

"Nuooh!?" The bullet hit her square in the forehead, sending her flying back into the truck bed. She slammed into the back wall and started rolling around in pain.

"H-How could you do that. If you don't give me any warning... I won't be able to contain myself." She rubbed her forehead happily, blushing as she complained to Hajime... or rather asked for more. Hoping to avoid a repeat of last time, Tio tried entering through the window feet first.

This time, it was her plump butt that got stuck in the window. She started squirming back and forth, trying to squeeze her

voluptuous behind through.

Hajime fired another set of bullets with Schlag, but he was unable to excise Tio from the window. Not only was her butt more firmly stuck than her boobs had been, the soft layers of fat cushioned the bullets' impact, weakening their force.

And so, instead of dislodging Tio, all Hajime succeeded in doing was giving her more pleasure.

"More, Master," she moaned, and Hajime disgustedly holstered his gun, giving up on shooting her out. The moment he engaged with that pervert was the moment he lost.

Yue had long since lost any respect she might have originally held for the dragonmen, but this was a new low. She rubbed her eyes in disbelief.

Realizing the barrage had stopped, Tio continued worming her way into the back. Eventually, she managed to squeeze her way in, and she let out a sigh of relief as she sat down.

"Haah... Haah... Unbelievable... No matter the situation, you don't hesitate. What a hopeless master you are. But fear not. For I can take any kind of love you wish to dish out. So... don't hold back. You can be even more violent with me if you desire. In fact, please be more violent with me."

"Shut up, pervert. And get away from me. In fact, open that door and jump out right now."

"Wha—!? Haah... Haah... I am truly blessed to have such an understanding master. However, I must refuse. I have decided to follow you wherever you may go. Not only is it the most efficient way to complete my mission, I must have you take responsibility for teaching me such pleasure. Thus, I have no reason to leave. No matter what you say, I shall chase after you. You will not escape me." Hajime's blunt refusal set Tio panting again, but she stubbornly refused his request. Her tone was in stark contrast to her ecstatic expression.

"You've gotta be kidding me. I don't have to take responsibility for anything. I was just trying to kill you back there. You should be glad I didn't actually end up finishing you off. And as for your mission, why not just go straight to the hero? He's the one at the center of this whole summoned warriors business, so go bug him."

"I wholeheartedly refuse. I know not what kind of man this hero is, but I am certain no one is more merciless and unforgiving than you, Master! Don't underestimate my tenacity. I have already

decided you are the only one fit to command me! I am not so fickle that I would change masters on a whim!" Tio's eyes were open wide and her hands clenched into fists. She was trying to sound cool, but in the end she was just a hopeless pervert who wanted Hajime to walk all over her.

"No matter where you run, I'll find you. I'll go to every town I can find and tell people I'm searching for the man that cruelly took my first, did this and that to me, made me unable to live without him, and then abandoned me."

"Now look here..." Hajime narrowed his eyes dangerously. He toyed with the idea of just killing her, but she wasn't an enemy and Yue definitely wouldn't let him. Another option was to beat her until she forgot ever meeting him, but with how tough she was she'd probably keep her memories and end up enjoying it.

All he could do was glare at her, but even that glare served to excite her. *Maybe it's already too late to get rid of her...*

"Don't look so disgusted, Master. I promise I'll be of use to you. I may not be as strong as you, but surely you saw what I was capable of in our previous battle. I'm not quite sure what your goals are, but I will help you achieve them. I'm begging you, Master."

"You're too repulsive to take along."

"Wha—!? Haah... Gaah... Mmmm!" Tio wrapped her arms around herself and rubbed her thighs together. Everyone just stared at her in revulsion. Finally, Hajime breathed a long sigh, then rescinded his statement.

"...Or so I'd like to say, but it won't really matter if I refuse, will it? As long as you don't get in our way, you can do whatever you want. I can't muster the willpower to deal with you anymore..."

"Oh? Oooh, very good! In that case, I will be in your care from now on, Master, Yue, Shea. You may call me Tio! Fufufu, this is going to be an enjoyable journey."

"Hmph."

"G-Glad to have you aboard..."

Hajime sighed again, Yue just harrumphed unhappily, while Shea was the only one that tried to be polite. With that, the perverted reptile, Tio, joined Hajime's party as they sped toward the city of Fuhren.

Little did they know that another meeting awaited them there. And that even further down the road, there would be one even more important reunion.

Three days after Hajime left the town of Ur.

The land around the city had been ravaged, and there were still mountains of monster corpses that needed to be disposed of. However, by some miracle, the townspeople had all come out of the ordeal alive.

Messengers had been sent out to inform those who had already evacuated of the good news. The town had also sent out runners to notify the surrounding towns and the capital. There was much rejoicing as the evacuees returned and people were reunited with their family, lovers, and friends. Despite the work that still needed to be done, Ur was filled with a festive atmosphere.

The townspeople decided to leave the walls Hajime had erected as is. Those that had remained behind gesticulated wildly as they recounted the unbelievable fight that had taken place just outside those walls.

The children's eyes lit up with wonder as they heard about Hajime and his party's heroic deeds. Meanwhile, the merchants were discussing how they could turn Hajime's wall into a new tourist attraction to make money.

The townspeople hadn't seen what had happened between Hajime and Aiko after the battle. They still believed he'd been a warrior sent by their fertility goddess. They had even dubbed his wall "The goddess' shield."

Similarly, they referred to Hajime as "The goddess' sword" or "The goddess' knight." David and the other knights were furious when they found out what the people were calling him. They were her actual knights, and yet Hajime had been the one to kiss Aiko. Sometime in the future, Hajime would cringe inwardly when he discovered people were really calling him that.

With the minor hiccup that was his own cringe-worthy nicknames, Hajime's plan to raise Aiko's popularity worked perfectly.

Anytime she walked through town, the people would stop and stare. Some of them even clasped their hands together in prayer. She was after all, the goddess who had saved their town from certain ruin. Her fame had started spreading to nearby towns as well. In Ur, her words were already held in greater reverence than the teachings of the church.

For her part, Aiko had busied herself by assisting the town's leaders with the restoration effort. However, those close to her knew her heart wasn't really in it.

She was still in pain over Shimizu's death. There was also the disturbing truths Hajime had dumped on her head before the battle, but those weren't the main cause. She couldn't get the image of Hajime shooting Shimizu out of her head.

Once the day's work ended, Yuka and the others retired to the Water Sprite Inn to eat dinner. Today too, Aiko mechanically spooned food into her mouth and gave absentminded replies to any question directed at her.

"Ai-chan-sensei... your magic is amazing! I can't believe you can even restore land that was so badly damaged... At this rate, it'll look normal again in another week!"

"I see... Well, that's good."

Yuka knew Aiko was still in shock, but she deliberately spoke cheerfully. She wanted to cheer Aiko up however she could. However, Aiko responded in the same generic monotone as always.

But Yuka herself was still shaken by the fact that her savior had shot her classmate. Though she tried to hide it, her classmates could tell she was forcing herself to act happy. Hence why her attempts to lighten the atmosphere failed, and she was unable to cheer Aiko up. The other students were too depressed to be of much use either.

"Aiko...did the mayor or the bishop give you trouble again? If they're bothering you, just let us know. I won't forgive anyone that tries to harm you, even if they are a holy man. I swore that I would serve you and you alone Aiko. No matter what happens, I'm on your side."

"I see...that's good."

At this point it was hard to tell if David was trying to cheer her up or proposing.

It was borderline heretical for a holy paladin to state they'd fight against the church, but he didn't care.

His men realized he was trying to steal a march on them by emphasizing "I" over "we." They glared angrily at David. No way they were going to let him use them to make him look good.

However Aiko casually brushed them off with the same absentminded response. She probably wasn't even listening. Atsushi and the other shrugged their shoulders. There was a smug "serves you right" expression on their faces. Some of David's knights were

looking at him like that too.

Aiko ignored their little squabble and continued robotically eating her dinner.

If only I'd talked to Shimizu-kun more... if only I'd realized his pain earlier... this wouldn't have happened... If only I hadn't asked Nagumo-kun for help... If only I hadn't let myself get taken hostage... If I'd... If I'd died... he wouldn't have had to kill Shimizu-kun... For the thousandth time, the scene of Hajime shooting Shimizu flashed through her mind. She gripped her spoon tighter.

Why did Nagumo-kun kill him? They were classmates, weren't they...? Was it because he was an enemy? Is that all it takes...? Is killing someone really that easy? Is life really that cheap? That's not right... Humans aren't monsters... you can't just kill them like that... Is he just someone who can kill easily...? If I leave him alone will he kill other students too...? Is he that dangerous? If he hadn't been here, would Shimizu-kun still be alive? If he died, would all the other kids be safe? As long as he's here... Wait, what am I thinking! No, that's not the answer! She was trapped in an endless spiral of regret and remorse. Her dark thoughts continued until she started fear and resent Hajime. Then, suddenly realizing what she was doing, she quickly put a stop to such thoughts and returned to hating herself.

There was so much to think about, and so much she didn't want to think about. Aiko's mind was like a collapsed bookshelf. Filled with information but completely unorganized.

A gentle voice interrupted her brooding.

"Aiko-sama. Was the food not to your liking?"

"Hweh?"

Foss Seluo, the owner of the Water Sprite Inn, was standing beside her. His voice was quiet enough to be lost in the din. But everyone in this inn knew when he was talking to them. His words possessed some strange quality that made them impossible for their recipient to miss. Even Aiko, who had been lost in a sea of her own thoughts, reacted to his voice.

Realizing she'd just blurted out a weird squeal, Aiko blushed as she turned to Foss.

"U-Umm what did you say? Sorry, I wasn't paying attention."

"My apologies for disturbing you. You seemed unhappy, so I was simply worried whether my food was not to your taste. I can bring out another dish if you'd prefer..."

"N-Not at all! Your food is delicious. I was just thinking about

something…”

Though she couldn’t actually remember what said food had tasted like. She looked around and saw everyone was staring at her worriedly.

She took another bite of food to convince everyone she was doing fine, but she swallowed too quickly and started coughing.

Everyone crowded around her in concern. Foss casually provided her with a napkin and a glass of water.

“S-Sorry. I keep causing you trouble…”

“Oh it’s no trouble at all.”

Foss’ gentle smile never left his face. He narrowed his eyes slightly, and said in a compassionate voice,

“By the way, Aiko-sama. This may be presumptuous of me, but may I offer you a word of advice?”

“Huh? Oh, yes. It’s not presumptuous at all.”

“Why not just believe in what you feel is right?”

“Huh?”

Aiko tilted her head in confusion. Foss smiled wryly. *I suppose I should explain that better.*

“It appears to me that you are struggling with something important. And there are so many things you have to think about and so many things you don’t want to think about, that you’re unsure of what to do. You can’t tell what’s right and what’s wrong. But you’re convinced that you still have to do something, and so you’re rushing to make a decision. But all that does is serve to make you even more unsure. Am I correct?”

“H-How did you…” Foss had read her like a book.

“I’ve had all sorts of guests stay over the years,” he replied with a serene smile.

“When you’re not sure what to do, it’s okay to trust in your instincts. People often warn others that blind faith blinds you to the truth. And that certainly is the case, sometimes. But I believe people need faith in something before they can act on it. So if you find yourself stuck, I think it’s okay to just believe in what you feel is right.”

“…Believe in what I feel is right.”

Aiko turned those words over in her head.

All of the regret, guilt, and growing resentment toward Hajime was still whirling around inside her. Hajime was one of her precious students, but he’d also killed another one of her precious students.

And depending on the situation, he might kill more of her students as well. She had been forced to accept that he was a potential threat.

But Hajime was still one of her students. She couldn't just abandon him. Just as she hadn't been able to abandon Shimizu, even though he'd plotted a massacre. That was why she was so confused. She knew she was being contradictory, but she couldn't help it. That was just the kind of person Aiko Hatayama was.

Foss didn't know the details of what had happened to Aiko. So he had no way of knowing that she was in this predicament right now precisely because she'd believed too hard in what she felt was right. And she couldn't move on because her beliefs were dead. But Foss' advice was still sound. Changing her perspective might shed new light onto her struggle.

Aiko put her fork down and started thinking.

Believe in what I feel is right. What even is that now? I wanted to return back to Japan with all of my students. But that's not possible anymore. Now I just want to go back without losing anyone else. And then there's what Nagumo-kun told me. That one of his classmates tried to kill him. I don't want to believe that... I don't want to believe that he's a ruthless killer either...Or that he'd really kill us if we get in his way. But the truth is...he killed Shimizu-kun without hesitation. So then...no, I have to believe in what I feel is right. She closed her eyes, banishing unwelcome thoughts. The others all watched her worriedly.

Nagumo-kun said he did it because Shimizu-kun was an enemy. And that he didn't have the luxury of changing his mindset. Nagumo-kun killed him because he was worried Shimizu-kun would attack the people he cared about if he let him live. He did it out of concern. If he truly was as heartless as he claimed, Yue-san and Shea-san wouldn't trust him so much. For their sake, he wanted to eliminate a potential threat. That's why he couldn't let Shimizu-kun live. Which means he didn't believe I could convince Shimizu-kun anymore. Nagumo-kun would have let Shimizu-kun live if I could have proven to him I could reform him. ...So in the end it's all my fault...because I was powerless...but still, Nagumo-kun didn't have to kill him so mercilessly...Shimizu-kun was on the verge of death as it was... The more she thought about it, the closer she grew to understanding the reason behind Hajime's actions. Hajime was neither a broken murderer, or an unfathomable monster, nor even Aiko's enemy. He was still her student, one who her words could still reach.

As she went over the chain of events again with a clear mind, Aiko suddenly remembered something. Something the shock of Shimizu's death had made her forget.

Wait. How could I have forgotten? Nagumo-kun had only come over when I called for help. But even if he hadn't done anything, Shimizu-kun would have died. He didn't have to shoot him! So why? Why did he do it? To make sure Shimizu-kun was dead? No, he knew as well as we did that he was beyond saving. Shimizu-kun would have died in a few minutes anyway. That's why I asked Nagumo-kun for help in the first place. Because I couldn't do anything... even though it was my fault he was— Aiko's eyes shot open. She couldn't believe it had taken her this long to figure it out.

That's right... Shimizu-kun was only shot because he was holding me. I was the target. He was just collateral damage. It was my fault he died! But we all thought Nagumo-kun was the one who killed him! We convinced ourselves it was his fault!

The blood drained from Aiko's face. Just as Hajime had feared, she blamed herself for killing Shimizu.

It was her love for her students that kept Aiko going. The realization that she'd caused the death of one of those students crushed Aiko. Her brain shut down, trying to protect her from her own realization. Her vision swam, and she nearly fainted.

Just before she fell into unconsciousness, Hajime's final words to her flitted across the back of her mind.

"I hope you can continue to stay strong." Back then she'd been too shocked to fully process the meaning behind those words. She'd just assumed he was giving her a few words of encouragement.

What if he said that because he knew this would happen...because he was worried about me? Worried that I would break if I learned the truth of why Shimizu-kun died. That's why...that's why he killed Shimizu-kun so brutally. He wanted me to think it was his fault... He wanted me to continue staying strong...to be the teacher everyone needed... Of course, Aiko understood Hajime by this point. She knew it wasn't just a selfless act on his part.

But she was forced to admit that he'd partly done it because he was worried about her.

The door to her heart, which had been about to slam shut forever, stopped. And slowly began opening again. Her blurry vision cleared. That realization didn't solve everything, but it did light a small fire in her heart. Where before there had only been the dark

depths of despair, there was now a faint, warm glow.

He protected me... And not just him. So many other people protected me too. Even now, my precious students are looking over me. I was so focused on protecting them, that I didn't realize they had been protecting me in turn...I still have a lot to learn. This is no time to be breaking down. Aiko steeled her resolve.

She'd probably regret being the cause of Shimizu's death for the rest of her life. But as long as there were still students who were relying on her, she couldn't wallow in despair. No, she didn't want to wallow in despair.

She swore once more that no matter what happened, she'd be there for the students. And this time, she wouldn't let herself be manipulated by her own ideals.

The fear and suspicion she'd felt toward Hajime vanished in an instant.

Nagumo-kun sure is bad at expressing himself. Even though he knew I might hate him forever for doing this, that I might even try to fight him... Come to think of it, he said he'd given my words a lot of thought. Was this his way of thanking me for my advice? He's saved me so many times since we were reunited. Not only did he warn me about the church, he even saved the town. And despite being such a fierce battle, he still brought Shimizu-kun to me like he promised. I can't believe I was such a mess. I kept chasing after an ideal that didn't mean anything...and even went so far as to force him to go along with it...I'm still immature when it comes to being a teacher. And despite all of that he still helped me... It's true he's become a harder person than he was before... but he still has some of his old kindness left. Or maybe he's getting it back little by little. Could it be that those two girls are helping him remember his former self? Aiko smiled bitterly to herself. She owed Hajime a great debt for what he'd done. She'd been nothing but a bumbling, inexperienced embarrassment of a teacher. And yet Hajime, the boy who'd had the weakest stats out of all of them, had returned against all odds and saved her more times than she could count.

More than anything, it made her happy that despite how much it looked as if he'd changed, his old self was still alive somewhere underneath.

But she felt a sharp twinge in her chest when she thought of how it was Yue and Shea that had kept the old him alive. Aiko tilted her head in confusion. It vanished as quickly as it came

though, and she decided it must just have been her imagination.

Come to think of it, I never thanked Shea-san for protecting me. I owe her my life... I need to make sure I thank her properly when I see her again. ...I suppose I owe Nagumo-kun my life as well. Their faces popped into Aiko's head. Then she blushed crimson as she remembered just how exactly Hajime had saved her life.

Th-That was just CPR! He just did it to save my life, there was no deeper meaning behind it! Th-There was nothing enjoyable about being kissed so roughly! I definitely did NOT enjoy that! She started slapping the table wildly, mentally denying accusations no one had said.

In case anyone had forgotten, Aiko was 25 years old. An adult. She had gone on dates before too. That being said, her actual experience when it came to love was very little.

The reason being, the only people who would willingly date a woman who looked like a little girl were "gentlemen." Also known as lolicons. There were a great deal of people who found Aiko's particular body type attractive. Some doubly so when they discovered she was legal. However they were all afraid of being labeled the l-word, so their relationship with Aiko usually stopped at friends.

In Tortus it wasn't strange for a girl in her early teens to be married already, so most people weren't bothered by her child-like appearance. Which was why David's infatuation with her was considered normal in this world. However Aiko had convinced herself at this point that no one could possibly be attracted to a short woman like her. So she failed to notice his roundabout professions of love.

Hence why the CPR Hajime had performed had been so stimulating. And now that she'd remembered, the image just wouldn't leave her mind.

Besides, he already has two lovers... though I guess if he already has two, what's a third— Wait, what am I thinking!? I'm a teacher, he's my student! Wait, that's not even the problem here! I'm not even in love with him! In fact, he's already two-timing as it is! That kind of immoral relationship isn't something a teacher should condone! It's dishonest! Love is supposed to be sincere! Sleeping with two girls at once is...immodest! I cannot let such an impure relationship be! I won't allow it! Her hands curled up into fists. Instead of slapping the table, she was banging on it now.

But it seems like he treats Yue-san as someone particularly special.

And her height and figure aren't too different from mine...D-Don't tell me he's into smaller girls!? Girls like m-me? Wait, wait, wait, what am I saying!? What does it matter what his type is? He's eight years younger than me...! Though Yue-san's a vampire, so there's probably an even bigger age gap between them. So does that mean he likes small girls who are older than him? Wait, why do I even care!? Get a grip, Aiko Hatayama! You're a teacher, he's your student! You can't get all worked up over just one little kiss! She stopped banging the table and buried her head in her hands. A few seconds later, she started banging the table again, only to repeat the cycle. Finally, she screamed "I'm his teacheeeer!" and banged her forehead against the table.

The others were all taken aback by her strange behavior. Foss, on the other hand, simply said "I see you've found your energy again," with the same calm smile on his face. What a formidable old man.

Eventually Aiko came to the conclusion that her heightened emotions at the time were to blame and that she had no feelings for Hajime whatsoever. However, that didn't change the fact that he was still her student. And in order to protect him, she needed to return to the capital. Reports of what he'd done would have reached the capital by now. She needed to be there to make sure the king and the church didn't brand him a heretic.

Little did she realize,

That her feelings for Hajime were more than just that of a teacher for her student.

Even though she mentally referred to all of her students as children, in her mind she'd started thinking of Hajime as a man. Feelings of love had slowly but surely begun to bloom.

She wouldn't realize that until much later, of course.

During a pitched aerial battle 8000 meters in the sky.

Epilogue I

The shadows in a dimly lit corridor suddenly began to writhe and squirm. A humanoid figure emerged from the wriggling mass, as if oozing out of the darkness. Like a developing film, her features slowly came into focus. Young, red hair, dark skin, and pointed ears. The wriggling mass of darkness didn't dissipate. Upon closer inspection, it was revealed that said mass was actually a living creature. It was like a chimera from hell, a mishmash of ferocious beasts all fused together into one black *thing*.

The woman looked down the dim passageway. Kouki's party lay in that direction, though they were too far to see with the naked eye. She deftly hid her presence and waited. The party passed by her hiding spot, never realizing she was there.

"Hmm, so that's the fabled hero. Looks like nothing but a spoiled brat to me. Do we really need someone like him? A shame my orders are absolute. Well, I've assessed his abilities. I should hurry up and finish this job so I can move onto conquering the labyrinth."

She touched the creature at her side. The wriggling darkness absorbed her, and she slowly faded from sight. A second later, it was as if there had never been anyone there.

Kouki and the others were still unaware. Unaware that countless enemies lay in wait mere feet from where they were.

Epilogue II

"Mama..." A young girl huddled in the corner of a cell. Iron bars and cold flagstones surrounded her. She couldn't have been more than four or five years old. Weakly, she cried out for her mother over and over. But there was no reply.

After a few minutes, she heard the sound of footsteps. She started trembling. She hugged her knees and shrunk back. A boorish looking man passed by her. Following behind him was the young boy who had been in the cell next to hers.

This was all information she inferred from what she heard. She didn't dare raise her head up to look. She was too afraid. That boy was the fifth. The fifth one she'd heard led out of here. The other four had never come back. This boy too, would probably never come back.

Young as she was, the girl still understood that they hadn't been released. Now and again, men would come into the room and examine the kids locked up here. Even if she didn't fully understand their haggling over prices, the girl knew that being taken from here wasn't a good thing.

"Mama..." Her faint voice trailed off, heard by no one. Swallowed up by the dark underbelly of the city...for now.

The monster of the abyss drew closer.

With him was a seductive vampire princess, an airheaded, worthless rabbit, and the newest addition to their party: a hopeless pervert of a dragon.

They drew closer to the intersection of fate, where a new meeting and a miraculous reunion awaited them.

Extra Chapter: A Very Dramatic Before and After

The whole world was dyed red.

The fading sunset illuminated a grisly sight. Flames burned throughout the city. Blood splattered the walls and clogged the gutters. A massive magic circle hung in the sky, eclipsing the tragedy below.

“This... This can’t...” A young girl’s voice echoed through the silence.

She had beautiful black hair and piercing golden eyes. And she couldn’t have been more than ten. Reflected in her eyes was her hometown, embroiled in a swathe of flames. She stood atop a small observation platform, her long hair and kimono swaying in the warm breeze.

She gripped the wooden guardrails so hard her knuckles went white. They creaked ominously under the force of her grip.

That wasn’t the strength a little girl should possess. But then, she wasn’t any ordinary girl. She was a member of the dragonman clan. And through her veins flowed royal blood.

She had watched as the world’s most beautiful capital, her hometown, was invaded and razed to the ground. The city of verdant trees and crystal waters had been unable to withstand such an overwhelming onslaught. Why did this have to happen? Until recently, the different races had lived together in peace. There had been no discrimination, no persecution.

She gazed, dumbfounded, as the flames raged through the city.

“Princess...it’s not safe here. You must escape.” The girl’s attendant urged her to flee. However, the young girl shook her head without taking her eyes off the city.

“Princess...”

“Venri. I am the princess of Klarus. My father, and my countrymen are still fighting down there. Yet you would have me flee? If there is a place I should be... it is down there.”

She pointed to the battle still raging below. Her attendant, Venri, ran up to her.

"You mustn't, Princess!"

"I know. Even if I were to go, I would only be a hindrance. Never have I cursed my youth and inexperience so."

A thin trail of blood ran down her mouth. She'd bit her lip so hard it bled. It took every ounce of her willpower not to rush down and aid the army below.

Her country had been razed and her people slaughtered. Now, her family was on the verge of being killed. And she was powerless to stop it. She hated her own weakness more than she despised her enemies.

It was then that the person whose safety she feared for the most appeared.

"Tio, I told you to head inside the barrier!"

"Father!"

The girl's, Tio's father was a giant of a man. Massive scaled wings sprouted from either side of his back. This was the man Tio respected more than anyone, the king of the dragonmen, Kharga Klarus.

Kharga was in bad shape. His combat kimono, which was made out of monster hide and sturdier than most armor, was tattered and filled with burn holes. His body was crisscrossed with cuts and burns. The massive gash across his stomach was still bleeding.

Kharga was the sturdiest black dragon in existence. On top of that, he was one of the few skilled enough to be able to only partially transform himself. Even attacks capable of pierce his kimono would still be stopped by his impenetrable scales.

His penchant for charging headfirst into the enemy lines while stopping everything they threw at him had earned him the nickname "Mobile Fortress."

And so Tio was shocked speechless when she saw how wounded he was. Kharga smiled bitterly and knelt down in front of his daughter.

"Tio. As you can see, we have lost. Though we tried everything we could, we were unable to fight against the changing times. I am sorry I could not at least leave you behind a home to live in."

"That, that cannot be. How could you say that, Father! For the dragonmen to perish at the hands of something so insignificant... It cannot be! Tell me it can't!"

“We have become the enemies of the entire world... Tio, do you remember what I told you? The one thing you can never do is avert your eyes from reality.”

“Father.”

That one word was filled with unimaginable pain and sorrow. Tio hugged her father, heedless of the grime and blood that smeared onto her kimono.

It just couldn’t be. Dragonmen were supposed to be the guardians of this world. They had built a place where people of any nationality, any race were accepted. A place where people helped each other and worked together. A place of peace. Every country, every species, had been indebted to the dragonmen in some way.

And yet, in just a few years it had all fallen apart. In the span of a few seasons, everything changed.

Dragonmen were monsters. Dragonmen were oppressing the different races. Dragonmen were prone to going berserk. Dragonmen had turned against the gods. Dragonmen were... heretics. *How did it come to this?* Tio thought.

Dragonmen’s ability to transform certainly was fearsome. It was magic no other creature, sentient or monster, possessed. But that was precisely why Dragonmen had strove to be nobler than anyone else. To turn that fear into awe, and then into respect.

They had disciplined themselves rigorously. At all times they were ready to help others, a paragon of bravery, and both the sword and the shield of all people.

As a result, they had managed to create a mortal paradise. Though it had taken centuries, they had created a kingdom where all races were accepted. Not only that, but they had created a global alliance, so that all people, everywhere, would help each other in times of need.

—Guardians of the world. —Protectors of peace. —Kings among kings. That was how the people had seen dragonmen.

But now those same people were killing her countrymen, spewing vile insults at them as they destroyed her home.

It felt unreal, like a nightmare. Over the course of a few years, everyone had come to despise and fear dragonmen. And now an alliance composed of every other race was burning her city. She still couldn’t believe it. This couldn’t be real, it had to be a dream. All she wanted was to wake up from this nightmare.

Wake up and go back to a world where her friends and family

were still alive. Where the lush trees and sparkling rivers of her hometown were still there. Where people still lived happily together, regardless of race or nationality.

"Tio! Get a hold of yourself! The future of the Klarus dynasty rests with you!"

"Father..."

Her father's stern voice brought her back to reality. She wiped away her tears and looked up at her father. She couldn't just cry forever, and wallowing in pleasant daydreams would achieve nothing.

Kharga gazed down at her, his eyes full of love. Without a word, he swept Tio up into a hug. He held her tight, savoring her warmth. As if this was the last time he would ever get to hold his daughter. Tio coughed and tried to loosen his grip. It was tight enough that she couldn't breathe.

But then she stopped. Over her father's shoulders, she had caught sight of Venri's expression. And she could tell from the strength of her father's hug that something was wrong. Suspicion welled up within her. Why had father left the battlefield to come to her?

"As you can see, we have lost." She recalled her father's words. Though she was still young, Tio was wise beyond her years. She put together all the puzzle pieces, then came to a bone-chilling realization. She realized what her father meant to do, and stared at him in shock.

"Father... this cannot be true. Please, tell me it's not."

"Heh. You really are sharp. I guess you inherited both Orna's looks and brains."

His wry smile confirmed Tio's suspicions. It appeared this was, in fact, the last time she would ever talk to him.

She didn't know how to put her thoughts into words, but she knew she had to say something. But before she could, there was a thunderous roar and a massive shockwave spread out from the capital's center. It was strong enough to shake even the faraway observation platform Tio stood on. She unconsciously covered her face and shrank back.

Silence followed in its wake. Tio and Kharga both looked grimly at the city.

"H-How could they..."

"....."

Tio sounded almost hysterical.

There was nothing left at the site of the explosion. It was just an empty crater. But that was not what Tio was referring to. One after another, pillars of wood started rising up from the ashes. On each of them was a crucified dragonman.

One in particular caught her attention. No matter how far away she was, she'd never be able to mistake that figure.

It was Orna, her mother. Her pale green hair and golden eyes made her recognizable from even a mile away. Normally she was a gentle person, full of smiles. But when she went into battle she turned into a gale. She tore through enemy ranks faster than the wind, leaving trails of destruction in her wake. Tio loved her more than anyone.

And now she was staring at her crucified corpse. With how badly wounded her body was, it was clear that she'd struggled until the very end. But now she was strung up as an example of what happened to those who resist.

A cold, dark fire burned in Tio's eyes. Her jet-black mana usually looked more majestic than fearsome, but right now the ripples of black that emanated from her body resembled the very depths of hell. Anger and hatred welled up within her, and she began transforming.

"Tio."

"Fa...ther."

Her body was covered in a raging whirlpool of mana, and she could barely speak through her anger. Before she could give in to her rage, her father knelt down and hugged her again.

Tio's golden eyes glowed with fury. Why aren't you trying to avenge her? Why aren't you trying to kill these bastards who slaughtered her people? Why are you so calm even though Mother was just killed? Her accusatory glare bore into Kharga.

Still hugging his daughter, Kharga spoke in a quiet but firm voice.

"We know not our purpose for being." Kharga silently urged his daughter to continue the mantra. Her anger still burning, Tio repeated the words she was taught since birth.

"Is this body beast, or human? If there is meaning to everything in this world, then where does our meaning lie?"

Kharga hugged Tio tighter and joined in the chant.

"For no matter how long we search, we can find no answer.

And so whether we are beast or human, we bare our souls and thus swear."

This was the vow with the world the dragonmen clan had made ages ago.

"Our eyes exist to pierce through falsehoods and see the truth."

Both father and daughter's voices melded together, forming a single whole. The strength drained from Tio's body as she gradually calmed down.

"Our claws exist to tear down walls, and destroy the malice within." Kharga let go of his daughter and gazed into her eyes. This was important. It was the last lesson he would ever teach his daughter. The power of their words calmed Tio's anger, and she slowly regained the solemnity dragonmen prided themselves on.

"Our fangs exist to bite through our weakness, our anger and our hate." More blood dripped from Tio's mouth. She bit through her lip again to remind her of who she was.

"For when we forget our compassion, we are no more than beasts. But so long as we wield the sword of reason—" Kharga lightly touched the blood on Tio's lips. The blood she'd shed were the tears of her heart. Gently, Kharga wiped them away.

Tears welled up in Tio's eyes. But she didn't let them spill. Hatred and anger eroded one's heart. To give in to such impulses was to be weak. She turned her negative emotions into tears, but she didn't let them fall. To do so would be betraying her pride as a dragonman.

Dragonmen were strong, kind, and above all, noble.

Now of all times, she couldn't forget those words. Not when her father was in front of her. Not when her people, when her mother had fought to the death to defend their pride as dragonmen.

Tio sucked in a deep breath, and nodded to her father. These were the words her mother, her father, and all of her people had lived by. The words they'd taught her.

"We are dragonmen!" She shouted that at the top of her lungs. Kharga hugged his daughter again. This time he knew it truly was the last time. However he had nothing to worry about anymore. Tio had grown into a splendid woman.

"Tio, listen well."

"What is it, Father?"

She knew their time together was coming to an end. She desperately held back her tears and looked up at her father

resolutely.

“Our true enemy, this world’s true enemy aren’t the people attacking us right now.”

“...Our true enemies are the ‘gods’ of the church, aren’t they? They are the ones who made this world so twisted.”

“That’s right. I did everything I could to destroy them, but... I wasn’t fast enough. Because of that, we dragonmen will perish here. We have no choice. You know why, don’t you?”

“I do. Because if we do not, the people of this world will remain twisted. The only way to end this war is for our race to vanish.”

Her heart sank as she spoke those words. Kharga nodded solemnly.

“The gods are not only powerful, but cunning as well. But they are not all-powerful. And evil will never reign forever. One day, eventually, someone will appear who can strike them down. Of that I am certain. Tio.”

“Yes, Father?”

Kharga gave Tio his last order, both as a king and as a father.

“Live.”

“But... Father. You said we—”

Her father had just impressed upon her how important it was that the dragonmen race perish. Kharga smiled triumphantly. It was an expression Tio had rarely seen.

“I’m no fool. I knew with how powerful my enemy was that I would need a backup plan. Dragonmen will indeed perish tonight... in the eyes of the world at least. Far from the continent, I’ve created a hidden village. Along with a secret path the gods will never discover. My father, along with a few chosen people area living there already. Until the time finally comes that we can overthrow the gods, they will stay hidden there.”

“Grandfather’s over there!? But Father, you said Grandfather had died... Ah, I understand now.”

Adul Klarus, the previous king, and Kharga had been aware of the enemy ever since the world had begun to change. They had made sure to take various precautions in case the worst happened. But most of them had been undone. At first glance it seemed simple coincidence, but they soon realized that the gods’ meddling was behind everything. Soon after, Tio’s grandfather, the strongest red dragonman alive, supposedly died in battle against an unknown threat without even leaving a corpse behind.

However in reality he had feigned his death, and headed to this hidden village. That had been Kharga and Adul's final ploy, the last card they could play to make sure dragonmen never truly vanished from the world. And by feigning his death, he made sure no one would be looking for him.

Tio was glad her beloved grandfather was still alive, but at the same time sad because she knew what this meant for her father.

"Father... you're not coming, are you?"

"I can't. I'm the current king. Without my death, this war will never end. And besides..."

"Besides?"

"I could never leave Orna all alone on the battlefield."

Tio smiled weakly at that. Kharga tenderly stroked her hair and spoke his parting words.

"Tio, you are the pride and joy of Klarus line. You inherited my black scales, your mother's wings, and your grandfather's fire breath. Live strong my daughter. You have your own black flames, and the fierce flames of the Klarus family to protect you."

"I will. I promise, Father."

Having passed on his wife's dying message, Kharga handed Tio over to Venri and flew off toward his final battlefield. Venri had been briefed on the plan ahead of time, and led Tio down the secret path. Just before she vanished inside, Tio looked back for one last time.

She saw a majestic black dragon tearing through the battlefield, his flaming breath so powerful it sundered the earth below.

Throughout the battle, the dragonmen had taken great pains to avoid killing the invaders. Though most of the world had turned against them, a few members of each race had believed in the dragonmen, and stayed behind. Kharga and the few remaining dragons fought only to give those people enough time to escape.

They refused to give the gods the satisfaction of watching people of the same race kill each other. Even on the verge of annihilation, they protected their citizens. No matter how painful their despair, they refused to give in to anger and hate.

Kharga's breath parted his enemies and his defiant roar rang out through the heavens. It was a challenge to the gods sneering down from up high, a resolute cry that their pride as dragonmen would never be sullied.

"Mmmgh." A faint groan could be heard from inside one of the

rooms of an eastern-style wooden house. A beautiful young woman, the person who had emitted the previous groan, rolled over in her sleep. Had anyone seen her in that moment, they would have been instantly smitten.

Her disheveled black hair and exposed cleavage made her look bewitchingly seductive. On top of that, her exposed legs and plump butt were sexy enough to blow away any man's self-control.

She must have been seeing a nightmare, as her body was covered in sweat. However, that only made her more alluring. A sheen of it covered her breasts and thighs, enticing the viewer.

"Hmph. I have not had that dream in a long time. Five hundred years later and still I see them in my dreams. It seems I have yet to truly grow up." Tio heaved a sigh as she straightened out her crumpled clothes. Then, ignoring her gloomy thoughts, she threw open the door. Sunlight flooded the room. A bright blast like that was powerful enough to wash away even the worst nightmares.

Tio looked out at her village. In the past 500 years, it hadn't changed at all. Kharga had chosen to put it on a bountiful island far off the continent's coast. The soil was well-suited to farming, and the island was populated by wyverns and wild animals. The dragonmen that had survived the tragedy and their offspring had lived peacefully here for the past five centuries.

It was a far cry from her old home, but it was good enough to house the few hundred dragonmen that lived here. Tio stepped onto her porch and heard a voice call out to her.

"Good morning, princess. Were you having a nightmare?"

"Mm, good morning. It was a dream about the past. I have not had a dream like that in ten years. Perhaps it was a message from my mother and father from the other world. A reminder not to forget them."

Venri, who looked to be rather old now, gave Tio a concerned look. However, Tio just winked playfully at her. Enough time had passed that she could joke about their deaths now.

Venri smiled awkwardly. She had intended to comfort Tio, but it looked as though that was unnecessary.

At first she had followed Tio around as her bodyguard, but now it was Tio who usually looked after her. On top of that, Tio's strength had far surpassed her own. In both physical and mental strength she was unparalleled. Only Adul, the village chief, could hold a candle to her anymore.

Had the dragonmen kingdom not been destroyed, Tio probably would have gone down in history as one of their greatest queens. That she never became one was one of Venri's greatest regrets. She put such gloomy thoughts aside and changed the subject.

"Would you like to have breakfast? I could get you something if you wish."

"Hmmm... Breakfast does sound good... Hm? Where's Grandfather? I do not sense his presence in the house..."

"Ah, Kartos-sama called for him earlier this morning. He has yet to return."

"What? Old man Kar called for him? This early in the morning?"

Old man Kar, as Tio called him, was one of the village elders, and as old as Adul. He had the rare job "Observer" and was skilled at detecting the flow of mana. Of course even for someone like him it wasn't easy to track mana somewhere as far as the mainland. Unless the usage of mana was so massive that its repercussions could be felt even on the island, it drained months of mana to scry mana usage across the continent. *The scheduled scrying was only a month ago. Which means whatever old man Kar sensed was massive enough that it could be felt even here.* Tio felt a, not exactly ominous premonition. It was more as if she could sense a change was coming. She said goodbye to Venri and ran off to Kartos' house.

When she arrived, she saw a few of the other elders were also there. There was a tension in the air, and Tio's heart began to race.

"You came too, Tio?"

"Indeed, Grandfather. I had this vague feeling that something was off. And judging from everyone's expressions... something has happened on the continent?"

Adul smiled wryly and nodded at his granddaughter's astute deduction. He had a thick mane of red hair and looked far too young to be called "grandfather" by anyone.

"It would seem the Holy Church, or rather the gods have summoned forth some truly odd guests. Quite a few of them too. One of them possesses a great strength. According to Kartos' divination, he holds the job, 'Hero.'"

"Hero..."

Divination was one of Kartos' job's skills. It allowed him to discern the job of anyone he specified. Tio narrowed her eyes and mulled the word over. Hero was a job she had never heard of.

“This is a turn of events we cannot ignore. This must be investigated. I was thinking we should send Aroyce out again to—”

“I will go.”

Aroyce was skilled in covert action, and blended easily into crowds.

For better or worse, Tio stood out. Her looks were of course conspicuous, but she also carried herself like royalty. Both her mannerisms and her speech were a dead giveaway. She could hardly pass for an average citizen. Hence why others more suited to the task had gone on previous scouting missions. Until now, Tio had been content to hear their reports.

Until the time was right, the world was not to learn of their existence... That was the village’s most important rule. If the humans ever learned dragonmen still lived, they wouldn’t rest until the clan was wiped out for good. For all those reasons, it was unwise for Tio to go to the mainland.

Though the kingdom of Klarus was no more, the villagers still called Tio “princess.” Tio understood very well her influence in the town. Which was why she had taken the law very seriously. For her comrades, her parents, and the world, she couldn’t let the dragonmen be destroyed. She hadn’t left, despite how much the village had bored her.

And yet, now she stated that she wanted to go. The elders all stared at Tio in shock.

“...Tio. Do you realize what you just said?”

“Yes, Grandfather. I understand all of the risks. But I still wish to be the one to go. Let me handle this investigation.”

“Why do you wish to go so badly? Why not let someone more suited to the task handle it?”

“I have this feeling. Grandfather, this development is going to change the world. Something inside me is telling me I have to go. If you try to stop me, I will force my way through. I absolutely have to see this through.”

“.....”

It was rare for Tio to be this stubborn. The elders were still staring at Tio in shock, but for a different reason this time. There was a fierce determination burning in her eyes.

Adul met her gaze, and after a long staring contest, shrugged. He nodded his assent.

“Very well. You may go, Tio. See the world for yourself.

However, make sure not to draw the gods' attention. And as the law states, you will go alone. Do you understand?"

"Completely. ...Thank you, Grandfather."

The other elders voiced their opposition, but Adul talked them down. In the end, they agreed to let Tio go.

The next morning. The sun had yet to rise. Tio was standing atop a cliff in the corner of the island.

The news that she would be going on the investigation this time had spread like wildfire. Starting with Venri, a procession of people had come to voice their protests. But in the end they were unable to change her mind, and she started packing for the trip.

The island was a fair distance from the mainland. Most dragonmen had to exhaust their entire mana supply to reach the continent. Even Tio, who had more mana than most, would have a hard time making the trip. The flight took nearly a whole day, which was why Tio had decided to leave early in the morning.

The entire village had come to see her off.

"P-Princess. Are you sure you won't change your mind? If anything happened to you..."

"She's right! At least take some guards with you!"

"Yeah, take me! I'll protect you even if it costs me my life!"

Even now Venri hoped against hope that she might be able to convince Tio. Aroyce, the village's veteran scout, offered to join Tio despite knowing the rules. Some of the other young men also offered to come along, blushing at their own boldness. Many of the other villagers tried to convince her not to go as well.

All of them cared deeply for her well-being. She was loved by the entire village.

"I understand your feelings. And I apologize for causing you such worry. But just this one, I am afraid I must have my way."

Her determined voice quieted the protests. Tio cast her gaze over the villagers. She looked them in the eye, challenging them to test her resolve.

"Venri. I know just how much you care about me. You have been by my side even longer than Grandfather has. You are like another mother to me. I beg of you, please let me have your blessing before I depart."

"Prin...cess..."

Tears leaked from Venri's eyes. No words could have made her happier.

“Aroyce. Look after my grandfather while I’m gone. Fufu, of all of my suitors you were the strongest. I can count on you to handle things while I am gone, right?”

“How can you call me strong when I haven’t even been able to scratch your scales even once? However, I could never refuse the woman I love. ...You never did play fair.”

Aroyce couldn’t bring himself to refuse after Tio smiled at him. Especially since she was trusting him to look after things.

Despite being over five hundred years old, Tio had never slept with a man. Most dragonmen were married long before they reached her age. However, no one had been able to clear Tio’s requirements. In order to become her husband, a prospective suitor had to— “I-I’ll beat you one day, Princess! And then I’ll finally... You have to stay safe, for me!” prove they were stronger than her by beating her in a fight. It was a simple enough requirement, but one that was nearly impossible to fulfill. For Tio’s strength had surpassed even Adul’s. Ever since the day she’d watched her parents die, Tio had devoted herself to training. At some point she’d grown so strong no one else could match her.

All of the young men who wished to wed Tio, including Ristan who was barely more than a boy, tearfully tried to stop her from going.

Tio was strong, kind, and noble. On top of that, she was beautiful and wise. Over the centuries every young dragonman had tried to win her hand in marriage. But none of them had managed to so much as scratch her scales. Tio was so tough that she had long since forgotten how pain felt.

“Seriously, what a bunch of hopeless men. I appreciate your concern, but... words can no longer stop me. Feelings alone are not enough. Strength alone can achieve nothing. You need both, or you can never hope to change my mind. I am going. And if you wish to stop me then prove you have the strength to drag me back. Maybe someday... one of you will be able to do manage that. Fufufu.” Tio chuckled and brushed off the men who were trying to stop her. After being told all that, there was nothing they could say back.

“My comrades. My beloved people. Watch me.” Everyone’s gaze focused on Tio. She addressed the village with all the solemnity and majesty of a real queen.

“I do not know what awaits me on the continent. Nor do I know what the future holds. However, the winds of change are blowing.

Something big is happening. And I know that I must confront this change directly. But fear not. Believe in me. Believe in your princess." —In the strongest dragonman alive, Tio Klarus. Everyone unconsciously took a step back. The force of her determination had cowed the crowd. No one uttered any more words of complaint. As one, they villagers bowed their heads. They had decided to put their trust in Tio.

Her eyes full of tenderness, Tio nodded to the crowd. She waved one last time to Adul, transformed into a jet-black dragon, and leaped off the cliff.

Sandwiched by the white clouds and sparkling ocean, Tio cut through the wind. She was finally on her way to an unfamiliar land.

Nothing had changed for the past five hundred years. As her father had commanded the day he died, she had stayed alive. However, she was done with just living. Like her parents had done before her, Tio was ready to stake her life for a cause. That was the kind of life Tio Klarus wanted to live.

She could feel that something was changing. The dream she'd had the other day must have been a sign.

Her gaze pointed forward, Tio said with conviction,

"Something is going to change... I can feel it."

"I can feel it, Maaaaster~"

"Quit moaning all the damn time, you pervert!"

Hajime held Tio up with his artificial limb. Every time he squeezed her face, she writhed in pleasure. They had stopped in a small town for dinner, but their meal was all but forgotten. The other customers were edging away from Hajime, while Yue and Shea had already moved to a different table. They were doing their best to pretend they didn't know Hajime.

Twitching, Tio feebly tapped on Hajime's arm. He would have let go at that point, but when he saw what she was holding in her hand, he started squeezing even harder. A vein pulsed in his forehead as he slowly put more force into his grip.

"No moooooooore! I'm dyiing! The ecstasy is killing meeeeeeeeee!"

"If you don't want to die, how about letting go of that thing in your hand?"

"Nnngh. This is a misunderstanding. I swear I'm not lying. Please believe me."

In her hand was a pair of Hajime's underwear. When she'd gone

to wipe her mouth during dinner she'd pulled that out of her pocket by mistake. He gave her a piercing glare and snatched his underwear back from Tio's hand.

Released from his iron grip, she fell limply to the floor.

"Th-That was wonderful... Haah... Haah," she panted, a vulgar smile on her face.

"Alright, so what's your excuse for pulling this out of your pocket during dinner of all times? Well, you perverted dragon lady?"

"P-Perverted dragon lady...For me, the proud daughter of the Klarus line to be called a perverted dragon lady. Haah Haah. And that scornful gaze... Excuse me, Master. But may I change my panties?"

There was a metallic clunk as Hajime pointed one of his artifacts at Tio. "Three, two..." he started counting down. Tio hurriedly starting explaining herself.

"This is a misunderstanding! I happened to find your underwear lying on the floor of your room and thought to return it to you! However..."

"However, what?" Hajime lowered his weapon. So far, Tio had a surprisingly valid reason for carrying his underwear around.

"I realized depending on how I used it, I could get you to punish me—"

Hajime snapped. Tio was unaware of the sudden change and was cupping her flushed cheeks and preparing her next words.

"Oh, Master, what kind of embarrassing things are you making me say?"

"Hm? What is it, Master? Your expression suddenly turned kind —" His expression certainly did look gentle. Then, without warning, Hajime pulled Tio forward so she was on all fours. Confused, Tio looked up at him as he circled around to her back.

“So in the end, you’re just a pervert.”

He pulled out Donner and fired a full round into her ass.

“Ahiiiiiiiiiiii! My arse! Oh my arse! Thank you so much, Master!” Sadly all that earned Hajime was Tio’s gratitude. She really was tough. There was no lasting damage on her butt.

Thanks to their antics, the group was kicked out of the restaurant. For some reason, Yue and Shea both gave him exasperated stares as they left. Depressed, Hajime dragged Tio behind him as they looked for somewhere else to eat.

For most of the journey she was just panting heavily, scaring off nearby passerby. However for a few seconds, she looked up at Hajime with a serious expression on her face and muttered,

“Grandfather, everyone. I do not think I can return anymore... Haah... Haah...”

Whether she meant to her village, or to being the princess everyone knew, only she knew.

It’s possible she may have meant something else entirely.

Afterword

Hello readers. Ryo Shirakome, chuuni-loving author of Arifureta here.

We've finally gotten to Hajime's reunion with his classmates. Unfortunately, the introduction of our ultra-masochist dragon pervert kind of overshadowed the emotional impact of that.... To be honest, as I was writing this extra story, even I felt like this was a bit too dramatic a change from before to after. But if it managed to get some laughs out of you guys, then it was all worth it.

This is a bit of a digression, but the Ai-chan defense force got a lot more screen time here than in the web novel version. It still feels like the female students are kind of the mascot for the whole party, though. I actually based their design off some of the side characters in K-On. Yuka's Himeko. Can you guess who the other two girls are? I'll let you try and figure it out.

As always, many thanks to Takaya-ki-sensei for his wonderful illustrations. I'm grateful as well to all of my proofreaders, editors, and everyone else involved in the publishing process. Thank you all very much. Last but not least, thank you, dear reader, for picking this book up.

I pray we meet again in the next volume.

Ryo Shirakome

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by Ryo Shirakome

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